

THE ENTRY EXPERIENCES, CHALLENGES, AND MEDIATING STRATEGIES OF  
PUBLIC SCHOOL SUPERINTENDENTS

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## **DEDICATION**

This work is dedicated with love to my son, Andrew. I wish for you, now and always, all the joy and deep satisfaction that life has to offer.

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## ABSTRACT

### THE ENTRY EXPERIENCES, CHALLENGES, AND MEDIATING STRATEGIES OF PUBLIC SCHOOL SUPERINTENDENTS

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The public school superintendent's role has changed substantially over time, and the work of superintendents is more complex, demanding, and challenging than ever before. Recent studies indicate that 70% to 80% of the nation's superintendents will leave their positions over the next five years, suggesting the imminent entry of many new superintendents in the wake of widespread vacancies. Existing literature has examined the organizational dimension of leadership succession; however, only scarce research has explored the lived experiences of incoming superintendents during their entry into the position. Consequently, relatively little is known about how they experience entry, about challenges they face during entry into the position, and about strategies they use to mediate them. This phenomenological study addressed those knowledge gaps by exploring the lived experiences of 20 incoming superintendents in 4 southeastern states. Its sample reflected the national distribution of superintendents with regard to gender, race/ethnicity, age band, locale, and point of entry into the superintendency. Participants led school districts ranging in size from 1,000 students to 150,000 students. Data were collected through semi-structured, individual interviews with participants. Iterative analysis of interview transcripts revealed challenges across 17 experiential categories

ranging from the purely occupational to the deeply personal. Most prevalent were challenges associated with school finance, time, and personal costs associated with the role; least prevalent were challenges associated with a sense of isolation, organizational deficits, and personnel administration. The frequency with which participants experienced several challenges varied considerably across personal characteristics and organizational features, most notably gender, locale, and point of entry into the superintendency. Participants applied 9 types of mediating strategies toward overcoming challenges. Most frequently, they leveraged communication and collaboration strategies, typically by applying them in novel ways to match specific contextual features of challenges they experienced. Participants frequently developed formal entry plans to guide their entry activities and often leveraged them to mediate specific challenges emerging during entry. However, they largely lacked either general or specific mechanisms for mediating personal costs they associated with the superintendency. Participants commonly offered positive appraisals of their mediating strategies' effectiveness, but emphasized the particular value of formal entry planning, professional counsel, and communication to their successful negotiation of emergent challenges. Implications for practice among incoming superintendents, school boards, and universities and professional organizations concern expectations and structures for formal entry planning; mechanisms for communication and time management; cultivation of effective board-superintendent relationships; recognizing and overcoming personal costs associated with the role; field-based university partnerships to support incoming superintendents; professional advocacy; and, other topics. Future research should explore the varying prevalence of experiential challenges across demographic variables to

explicate the ways in which they manifest differently for members of those subgroups. It should also further examine personal costs associated with the superintendency and specifically seek to identify effective mechanisms for mediating related challenges. Grounded theory research should seek to define a robust, comprehensive conceptual model for contemplating the various sources, intersections, and contextual underpinnings of challenges facing incoming superintendents to clarify and inform the long-term direction of research in this field.

## **CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION**

During my 18 years as an educator, I have served the same North Carolina school district as a high school English teacher, middle school administrator, and district administrator. Since 2003, I have served as the school district's human resources director. During my time in the school district, I have worked for five superintendents. Partly due to the nature of my work as a human resources director and its concern for vacancies and the individuals who fill them, and partly as a byproduct of my own personal curiosity, I have often wondered how those five individuals conceived of their work as superintendents and how they adjusted to the unique demands associated with it. Often, and in their own ways, they have said in almost so many words that nothing fully prepares an individual for the superintendency. That experience, it would seem, is genuinely unique, and neither formal preparation nor career experience nor purposeful anticipation quite prepares one for the realities of entry into the role. The sentiments of those superintendents seem to reflect a conclusion common among superintendents throughout the profession. How, then, do incoming superintendents appropriately prepare themselves for entry into the role? What is that entry experience like for them? What challenges await them, and how do they respond to them while simultaneously learning and leading as superintendents?

Those questions have resonated in my mind throughout my doctoral program. I have sought their answers through observation, discussion, reading, and research, but they have proven elusive. Existing literature, though instructive about many topics related to the superintendency, is largely silent on these particular questions, leaving incoming superintendents to answer them for themselves only through trial and error.

This dissertation research into the nature of incoming superintendents' entry experiences is both philosophical and practical. It represents the intersection of my professional experience, my personal curiosity, and my academic preparation. Through it, I seek to answer these questions not only for myself, but also for those who aspire to the superintendency and those who would seek to support superintendents throughout their entry experiences.

### **Nature and Significance of the Problem**

By almost all accounts in recently published literature, turnover among the nation's public school superintendents has climbed to an alarming level. Two substantial national studies of superintendents, both sponsored by the American Association of School Administrators (AASA), presented compelling statistics that characterize the crisis of superintendent turnover. In the first, Glass and Franceschini (2007) estimated that 2,244 of the nation's superintendents left their positions during the 2005-06 school year and calculated a corresponding turnover rate approaching 17% across the country. Illustrating the significance of that statistic, they observed that “nearly 80% of all superintendents will retire or change positions” within a five-year period (p. xvii). Those figures were corroborated by the more recent AASA study that found more than half the nation's superintendents planning to leave the position entirely by 2015 (Kowalski, McCord, Petersen, Young, & Ellerson, 2011, p. 24). Another 19% of the study's 1,838 respondents reported an intention to leave their current positions in order to serve as superintendents in other school districts. Only 32% of respondents reported an intention to remain in their current positions over the next five years. Both studies suggest the

likelihood of substantial turnover among current superintendents and, more importantly, the corollary entry of many incoming superintendents within the next several years.

Other independent studies have produced similar patterns of results. Cooper, Fusarelli, and Carella (2000) found in a national survey of superintendents that nearly 80% are either at or approaching retirement age, suggesting the imminent likelihood of widespread superintendent vacancies as a result of retirement. Several studies examining superintendent tenure and turnover within the context of specific states and organizational settings have suggested that superintendents typically leave their positions within two-and-a-half to six years of their entry (Byrd, Drews, & Johnson, 2006; National School Boards Association, 2001; Natkin, Cooper, Alborano, Padilla, & Ghosh, 2002; Yee & Cuban, 1996). A recent study of superintendent turnover within the state of Kentucky found that only 26% of the state's school districts retained the same superintendent from the 1998-99 school year through the 2007-08 school year (Johnson, Huffman, Madden, & Shope, 2011, Figure 1). During that same time period, 47% of the state's school districts experienced one turnover event (employing 2 superintendents over 10 school years) and 27% of the state's school districts experienced two turnover events (employing 3 superintendents over 10 school years).

While some debate exists within the literature about whether or not high turnover among superintendents represents a crisis for school districts given the apparent availability of applicants for superintendent vacancies (Bjork, Grogan, & Johnson, 2003; Glass & Bjork, 2003; Kowalski, 2003), it is nevertheless clear that a large number of incoming superintendents will enter the position as vacancies mount over the next five years. That conclusion is reinforced by current data from the U. S. Department of Labor's

Bureau of Labor Statistics (2010), which projects an 8% increase in the nation's demand for new superintendents by 2018.

Transitions in leadership positions present complex challenges for school organizations (Miskel & Cosgrove, 1985; Sutton, 2010). High superintendent turnover rates, especially when they are further compounded by ineffective transition planning within school organizations, adversely affect school districts by straining interpersonal relationships and impeding institutional progress (Fagan, 2003). While Hargreaves (2005) examined leadership succession among principals, his observation that “leadership succession is not just a temporary episodic problem in individual schools, but a pervasive crisis in the system” (p. 164) might be fairly used to describe the superintendency as well. He concluded that effective “leadership succession often is undermined by poor planning” (p. 168) and argued that school organizations should deliberately establish and implement thoughtful, responsive succession plans to more effectively manage inevitable changes in leadership.

Publications targeting educational practitioners have offered a few organizational responses to transitions in the superintendency (Sutton, 2010). Among those practical recommendations are strategies through which local school boards may mitigate turnover and prepare more effectively for leadership succession (Esparro & Rader, 2001), strategies for the development and use of entry plans by novice school leaders (Neely, Berube, & Wilson, 2002), and strategies that novice superintendents may use to avoid mistakes commonly associated with the entry period (Kerrins & Cushing, 2001). At the same time, some scholarly literature has also identified a handful of recommendations for improving transitions in the superintendency. Kasper's (1997) educational ethnography

of 12 Minnesota public school superintendents, for example, recommended that school districts develop multifaceted strategies for deliberate transition planning that are thoughtfully linked both to the circumstances leading to the succession event and to the organizational and community context of the school district where the succession event occurs. Kasper argued that no single model for facilitating smooth transitions in the superintendency is effective in all circumstances and that a school district's choice of specific transition strategies must be highly contextualized.

Problematically, however, research specifically exploring the nature of superintendent entry as a lived experience is scarce, offering incoming school leaders, their employing boards of education, and policymakers only a limited understanding of how superintendents experience entry into the position, characterize challenges facing them during entry, and mediate those challenges as they negotiate the entry experience. Existing literature does, however, suggest that the entry period is a pivotal time for incoming public school superintendents (Sutton, 2010). It offers these leaders their first, and perhaps their best, opportunity to learn about the organizational and social context of their work (Lytle, 2009). Incoming leaders often learn about the culture of their work through their relationships with colleagues, and they may specifically leverage their entry experiences to identify organizational needs and form an understanding of their organizational context (Zimmerman, 2007).

Conducting formal and informal entry interviews with stakeholders may inform new leaders' understanding of their organizational context, and establishing specific entry plans may help them to structure their learning and frame key induction activities during the entry period (King & Blumer, 2000). Some superintendents have even been found to



develop entry plans before starting in their new positions in order to focus their activities throughout the entry period and to structure how, when, and what they learn about the organizational context of their work (Dlugosh, 1994). Jentz and Murphy (2005) observed that successful entry planning “enables three kinds of learning: learning about your new place, learning about yourself, and collective learning about the organization as a whole” (p. 740). As such, entry planning may provide a powerful mechanism for mitigating initial confusion, uncertainty, and frustration for incoming superintendents.

The relationships that incoming school leaders form during the entry period also influence their capacity to lead their organizations well beyond the entry period itself (Sutton, 2010). Those relationships can ultimately help them to initiate organizational change over time and to gain support for their long-range leadership initiatives (Zimmerman, 2007). It likewise “provides a window of opportunity for introducing symbolic change” (King & Blumer, 2000, p. 359) and offers them an opportunity to express their individual, distinctive styles as executive leaders for the first time, thereby making their first impression as the senior leaders of their organizations (Lytle, 2009). Finally, while its availability is somewhat limited, case study research on incoming superintendents has detailed some of their individual experiences during entry (Bogotch, 1995; Dlugosh, 1994; Keedy, 1995) and highlighted how interrelated personal, interpersonal, and environmental forces influence them during their entry into the position (Hart, 1987).

Notwithstanding a few selections like these that specifically address the entry experiences of incoming superintendents, the vast majority of existing literature examines other dimensions of leadership transitions. It focuses predominately on succession in

corporate and other settings outside the field of public education (Giambatista, Rowe, & Riaz, 2005). Because private businesses and industries substantially differ from public school systems with regard to organizational structure, regulation and governance, social and political context, clientèle, and intended outcomes, findings from studies of leadership succession in those corporate environments do not transfer well to the public school setting and suggest only tangential perspectives on succession in the public school superintendency. Relatively little research specifically examines leadership succession in the superintendency.

Further, dominant leadership succession frameworks focus more on the organizational cycle of leadership succession and succession planning than on the lived experiences of incoming leaders and draw little constructive knowledge from the personal experiences of superintendents as a group (Firestone, 1990; Gordon & Rosen, 1981; Miskel & Cosgrove, 1984, 1985; Ortiz & Kalbus, 1998). As a result, existing literature leaves a problematic gap in phenomenological understanding of the entry experience as a personal event *per se*, especially as it relates to the public school superintendency. A better understanding of how incoming superintendents negotiate entry therefore complements existing literature focused primarily on succession as an organizational cycle. Absent such an understanding, incoming superintendents are left to negotiate entry largely by instinct and intuition alone, and school boards and policymakers have little basis on which to develop support systems for incoming superintendents.

Given clear evidence that high turnover rates will trigger the widespread entry of incoming superintendents within the next five years (Cooper, Fusarelli, & Carella, 2000;

Glass & Franceschini, 2007; Kowalski et al., 2011), a better understanding of the entry experience is a pressing need both within the scholarly community and among practitioners. Phenomenological research is particularly well-suited to describing the lived experiences of groups (Creswell, 2007). Phenomenological research into the entry experiences of incoming superintendents stands not only to fill a problematic gap in scholarly leadership succession literature, but also to improve the entry experiences of future superintendents and better inform the support systems available to them throughout the entry period.

### **Purpose and Research Questions**

While leadership succession research has grown over the past 40 to 50 years, it predominately concerns succession as an organizational cycle, especially in settings outside the field of public education. As a result, relatively little is known about the lived experiences of incoming public school superintendents. Exploring how incoming superintendents negotiate their new roles during the entry period informs leadership succession in ways that traditional leadership succession frameworks have not. With an improved understanding of the phenomenon, incoming superintendents will be better equipped to approach and negotiate entry, and policymakers will be better informed about ways in which they might support incoming superintendents during entry.

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe how incoming superintendents experience entry into the position. It specifically sought to describe how they plan for entry and characterize challenges associated with the entry experience. An important goal of the study was to identify and describe strategies used by incoming

superintendents to overcome challenges encountered during the entry period. Toward that end, this study sought to answer five research questions:

1. How do incoming superintendents plan for their entry into the position?
2. What challenges do incoming superintendents associate with their entry into the position?
3. Are there variations in those challenges based on the personal characteristics of incoming superintendents and the features of their organizations?
4. What strategies do incoming superintendents use to mediate challenges associated with entry into the position?
5. What value do incoming superintendents assign to those mediating strategies?

### **Definitions**

As they are used throughout this study, several terms have distinct and specific meanings:

1. *Leadership succession* refers to the periodic replacement of leaders within an organization. This study conceptualizes leadership succession in the superintendency as a bifurcated process featuring both an organizational dimension for the school district and a personal experiential dimension for the incoming superintendent during his or her entry into the position.
2. *Incoming superintendents* have begun employment in a specific superintendent position within the past 18 months. Incoming superintendents may be either *novice* or *veteran*. Novice incoming superintendents are new to their specific positions and have no previous professional experience in the

role. Veteran incoming superintendents are new to their specific positions, but have previous professional experience in the role.

3. *Entry* describes the lived experiences of incoming superintendents as they assume new leadership roles within an organization, interpret and negotiate those experiences, and learn about their work and its context.
4. *Entry period* describes the time frame during which incoming superintendents experience the phenomenon of entry. Several previous studies (Hernandez, 2005; Martinez-Perez, 2005; Roughton, 2007) have arbitrarily defined the entry period to include only the 90 days immediately following an incoming superintendent's first day of work in the position. As it is conceptualized within this study, the entry period may variably extend well beyond those first 90 days in the position. The study was appropriately delimited to accommodate that flexible conception of the entry period's duration.
5. *Entry plans* identify and describe activities that incoming superintendents intend to undertake in order to facilitate, guide, or direct their entry. *Formal entry plans* are distilled in the form of a written document. *Informal entry plans* are conceptualized only in the incoming superintendent's mind and are not distilled to written form.

### **Delimitations**

The following delimitations bounded this study:

1. The study was delimited to incoming superintendents who had held their positions for 18 or fewer months. Participants included both novice and veteran incoming superintendents in order to capture potential variations in

the entry experience that could have been lost by constraining the study to include only those incoming superintendents entering the role for the first time in their professional careers. Incoming superintendents serving in non-traditional or special purpose school organizations were excluded from the sampling frame due to the highly specialized settings for their work.

2. The study was delimited to incoming superintendents within the states of Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Tennessee in order to balance the need for a broad cross-section of participants against reasonable physical access to participants for semi-structured interviews.
3. While interview data occasionally implicated organizational issues of leadership succession within participants' school districts, this study was delimited to focus specifically on the personal, lived experiences of incoming superintendents and examined organizational issues of leadership succession only insofar as they were endemic to superintendent entry as a phenomenological feature of participants' lived experiences.

## **CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

This review provides a critical synthesis of available research into the context of the public school superintendency, the challenges facing public school superintendents, and the topic of leadership succession in the superintendency in order to contextualize and validate the research problem presented in this study. It also translates that synthesis of research into a conceptual framework that grounded the study and helped to inform the interpretation of its findings.

Existing literature examines a wide range of topics related to the public school superintendency. Two branches within the literature specifically inform the context, scope, and significance of this phenomenological study of superintendent entry as a lived experience. This review explores both branches. It includes a discussion of the broad context of the public school superintendency and an examination of existing leadership succession literature. Discussion of the broad context of the public school superintendency focuses on three themes: the evolving role of the public school superintendent, the current demographic profile of public school superintendents, and challenges facing public school superintendents. Examination of those challenges is further organized into three specific topics, including common challenges associated with the superintendency as a professional role, contextual challenges associated with the superintendency, and challenges associated with entry into the superintendency. Discussion of existing leadership succession literature focuses on four themes: a review of dominant models for leadership succession research, studies of transition support for new superintendents, studies of superintendent entry, and literature connecting socialization theory to leadership succession. A summary of limitations within the

existing research follows the review of literature, and the chapter concludes with a description of the conceptual framework that grounded this study and helped to inform the interpretation of its findings.

### **The Context of the Public School Superintendency**

In exploring the nature and broad social and organizational context of the American public school superintendency, Glass and Franceschini (2007) observed that: ...superintendents play a unique and critical role being the connecting link between schools and communities represented by school boards... In summary, the superintendency encompasses responsibilities in instructional leadership, fiscal management, community relations, board relations, personnel management, and operations management. The role is one of both leadership and management within the district and the community. These executive directors are key players in the success or failure of the nation's reform agendas. (p. xiii)

Superintendents conduct their work in an increasingly complex and demanding environment with “an enduring attitude of change, innovation, and reform,” and an increasingly diverse set of expectations and responsibilities are attached to their work as education leaders (Kowalski et al., 2011, p. xiii). The complex demands facing modern superintendents are reflected in the *Educational Leadership Policy Standards* revised and adopted by the National Policy Board for Educational Administration (NPBEA) in 2008. As the Council of Chief State School Officers (2008) observed, escalating accountability standards from state and federal sources and increased pressure to prepare graduates for success in a global economy are changing the nature of expectations for the



superintendent's work and “making them more complex than ever” (p. 3). In response, NPBEA's revised standards charge superintendents with:

1. Setting a widely shared vision for learning;
2. Developing a school culture and instructional program conducive to student learning and staff professional growth;
3. Ensuring effective management of the organization, operation, and resources for a safe, efficient, and effective learning environment;
4. Collaborating with faculty and community members, responding to diverse community interests and needs, and mobilizing community resources;
5. Acting with integrity, fairness, and in an ethical manner; and,
6. Understanding, responding to, and influencing the political, social, legal, and cultural contexts. (p. 6)

This section describes the ways in which the work of superintendents has evolved over time, provides a national demographic profile of today's superintendents, and synthesizes literature that has examined the specific challenges facing superintendents in the modern era of public education.

**The evolving role of the public school superintendent.** The role of the public school superintendent has evolved substantially over time. The longer history of that evolving role underscores the increasingly complex and challenging work of modern superintendents. Kowalski et al. (2011) offered a thoughtful discussion of the superintendent's changing role in the introduction to their national study of superintendents for the AASA. Their synthesis described four traditional conceptualizations of the superintendent's role in public education since the mid-1800s.

The first conceptualization is that of the superintendent as teacher-scholar, common from 1865 until around 1910. As teacher-scholars, superintendents' central work concerned the direct supervision of curriculum and instruction in classrooms throughout their school districts. Superintendents gave counsel to local boards of education on matters of teaching and learning and ensured consistency in curriculum delivery through the personal supervision of classroom teaching. In a sense, superintendents served as lead teachers for their school districts throughout this era. Cuban (1988) additionally noted that many superintendents routinely published articles in scholarly education journals, distinguishing them as intellectual leaders in their field.

The onset of the industrial revolution in the early 1900s altered this early view of the superintendent's role. Through the mid-1900s, schools were substantially influenced by principles of efficiency and output common to business and industry, and superintendents were re-conceived as business managers for their school districts. In the same way that managers were distinguished from workers in the industrial setting, superintendents were likewise distinguished from teachers in the education setting, and school administration emerged as a distinct specialization within the field of public education for the first time. The work of superintendents and teachers became more fully delineated, and a “control core culture – that is, an authoritative, impersonal, and task-oriented set of values and beliefs” was born (Kowalski et al., 2011, p. 3).

Just as the industrial revolution re-shaped the role of the superintendent in the early 1900s, the Great Depression re-shaped it once again in the 1930s. As Kowalski et al. (2011) explained, the crash of the stock market substantially undermined public confidence in the principles that fueled the industrial revolution, and a renewed interest in

democratic control followed. This broad social interest in democratic control was soon translated to the public school setting, and superintendents assumed the role of statesmen for the first time. They were expected to cultivate and sustain widespread political support for schools and became ambassadors for democratic governance of public school organizations. This role was short-lived, though, as interest in the social sciences flourished.

In the wake of intense interest in the social sciences that emerged by the middle of the twentieth century, the superintendent's role was re-conceptualized once again. By the mid- to late 1900s, the superintendent was expected to identify and implement solutions to complex social and educational problems, and to ground those solutions in empirical evidence and social scientific thought. In the wake of growing enthusiasm for social scientific methods, the work of superintendents became highly technical, and their demonstrated expertise in empirical research was commonly expected (Kowalski et al., 2011).

Drawing on the work of Drucker and others, Kowalski et al. (2011) added a fifth conceptualization to this traditional perspective on the historical evolution of the superintendent's role: the superintendent as communicator. They argued that the role of communicator implicitly accompanied each of the four roles traditionally attributed to superintendents. In their estimation, the form and function of superintendents' communication shifted to match the evolving roles conceived for them. In one era, superintendents' communication served to define and inform; in another era, it served to maximize administrative control and legitimize formal authority. More recently, it has served to empower constituents and stakeholders and to build internal capacity among

other participants in the public school setting. Just as the role of superintendents has evolved over time, so too has their communication.

Without a great deal of variation, the four traditional roles Kowalski et al. (2011) described are consistent with those generally reflected in the literature, which commonly links the superintendent's changing role to the broader social forces and developments associated with a given era in the nation's history. Griffiths (1966), for example, likewise characterized superintendents as scholars, business managers, agents of organizational improvement, and facilitators of shared leadership during distinct eras over the past 150 years. Just as the role of the superintendent has evolved over time, so too has the demographic profile of the nation's superintendents. A review of recent demographic data illustrates a few important ways in which the nation's population of superintendents has changed and raises questions about how their personal characteristics may influence the nature and quality of their experiences in the superintendency.

**Demographic profile of public school superintendents.** Kowalski et al. (2011) offered a rich profile of public school superintendents and provided the most thorough and current source of basic demographic information available to date. Perhaps most striking among their findings is that a greater number of women served as superintendents in 2010 than ever before. Since 1982, the nation's percentage of female superintendents has grown steadily from 1% to 24% (Figure 3.2). In the nation's largest urban school settings, where nearly 34% of all superintendents are women, this change in the traditional demographic pattern is even more notable (p. 18). At the same time, the percentage of superintendents self-identifying as non-white tripled from 2% in 1980 to

6% in 2010 (Figure 3.3). Increasingly, it would seem, traditionally under-represented populations are accessing the superintendency.

Kowalski et al. (2011) also documented noteworthy changes in the ages of superintendents. Specifically, the number of superintendents within the middle age band between 46 and 60 years shrunk, while the number of superintendents within the lowest and highest age bands increased. The number of superintendents below the age of 45 years grew from 10% in 2000 to 15% in 2010, and the number of superintendents over the age of 60 years grew from 8% in 2000 to 18% in 2011 (Figure 3.4). While the authors did not offer reasons for those changes in superintendent age, it seems reasonable to speculate that a growing number of the nation's superintendents are approaching retirement age and that, as retirements increase, retiring superintendents are being replaced by younger superintendents often entering the position for the first time. Such a theory is consistent with the retirement intentions of superintendents described in the first chapter and with findings in the AASA report that “individuals are more than twice as likely to become a superintendent before the age of 41 than after the age of 55” (p. 31).

The percentage of married superintendents has remained virtually unchanged over the past decade. In 2010, the percentage of superintendents who were married was estimated at 93%; in 2011, an estimated 91% of superintendents were married (p. 21). Superintendents reported high rates of membership in both national and state organizations, including the AASA (76%), a state superintendent organization (89%), and the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (47%), while only 1% reported no membership in any professional organizations (Table 3.4). These findings

suggest that superintendents are characteristically attached to professional networks that specifically serve their specialized needs and interests.

Finally, the study captured data on the political orientations of the nation's superintendents, 37% of whom reported affiliation with the Democratic party, 28% of whom reported affiliation with the Republican party, and 25% of whom reported affiliation with the Independent party. Interestingly, 9% reported affiliation with no organized political party (Table 3.6). Beyond party affiliation, only 15% of superintendents self-identified as “liberal,” while 55% self-identified as “moderate” and 30% self-identified as “conservative” (Table 3.7).

Superintendents across the nation lead school districts in predominately rural settings. Based on locale definitions adopted by the National Center for Education Statistics (n.d.), 56% of the nation's school districts are situated in rural settings, while 18% fall within towns, 20% are suburban, and 6% fall within cities (Provasnik, KewalRamani, Coleman, Gilbertson, Herring, & Xie, 2007). Their career patterns suggest that superintendents predictably enter the role from a variety of other positions in education (Kowalski et al., 2011). Glass (as cited in Glass & Franceschini, 2007) reported that the typical superintendent serves as a teacher for five to six years, as a building-level administrator for another five to seven years, and as a district administrator for another five to six years before entering the superintendency for the first time. Approximately 37% of superintendents initially access the position from the role of deputy, associate, or assistant superintendent, while almost half transition directly to the superintendency from a principalship, bypassing other district administrative positions (Glass & Franceschini, 2007). Fully two thirds of superintendents enter the position from

outside the school district, while only one third enters the position from other professional roles within the same school district (Kowalski et al., 2011).

Demographic information collected over the past decade offers an instructive profile of the nation's superintendents. Most notably, the role is increasingly filled by traditionally under-represented populations, including both women and non-White individuals (Kowalski et al., 2011). Further, some evidence suggests that female and non-White individuals are most prevalent among first-time superintendents (Glass, 2001). While many superintendents gain professional experience as deputy, associate, or assistant superintendents, even more move directly from the principalship into the superintendency without any experience in district administrative roles (Glass & Franceschini, 2007). A striking number of superintendents enter the position as external candidates, intuitively limiting their prior knowledge of the school districts they will lead. At the same time, an increasingly aging population of superintendents is being slowly replaced by increasingly younger successors to the position (Kowalski et al., 2011). While these observations begin to suggest some of the challenges facing superintendents, a close examination of the literature reveals that this changing population of school leaders conducts its work in an increasingly intense and demanding environment, highlighting the need to better understand how they experience entry into the role and mediate the challenges that await them.

**Challenges facing public school superintendents.** The work of modern superintendents is more complex and challenging than ever before (Glass & Franceschini, 2007). Some challenges appear to be universally common to the superintendency as a professional role, while others appear to vary based upon personal characteristics and

other contextual factors. Others still appear uniquely linked to the entry experience. The following sections describe those challenges that are common to the superintendency, those that are contextual, and those that are specifically associated with the entry experience.

***Common challenges associated with the superintendency.*** Challenges commonly associated with the superintendency as a professional role are well documented. Most important among them is the complex nature of the work itself, where superintendents must concurrently attend to educational, managerial, and political responsibilities (Nestor-Baker & Hoy, 2001; Orr, 2006). Superintendents are simultaneously expected to lead school organizations, ensure the educational success of all students, respond to evolving community needs, facilitate school reform initiatives, model understanding and demonstrate accessibility to both internal and external stakeholders, and manage myriad financial and business operations while serving as good stewards of taxpayer funds. Likewise, superintendents must balance competing interests, mount effective public relations campaigns, and bring resolution to conflicts – all while responding to mounting state and federal mandates for demonstrable student achievement results. This complex and often disparate array of professional responsibilities means that superintendents “are like the ‘three men in a tub’ all rolled into one – butcher, baker, and candlestick maker. And they do all this in the glaring eye of the public and without the authority to do what is demanded of them” (Glass & Franceschini, 2007, p. ix). Further, this complexity in superintendents' work continues to increase as information technologies rapidly expand, involvement of the federal government in public education grows, and concern about the competitive position of the nation and its schools in the



global marketplace intensifies (Kowalski et al., 2011). As Orr (2006) observed, though, the greater challenge facing superintendents is not simply responding to the immediate complexity of their work context, but rather “how to work within it and even try to change it for the benefit of their schools and students” (p. 1366).

Problems of professional practice facing superintendents are also well documented. For example, inadequate financing of public education persistently compounds the already difficult work of superintendents. In AASA studies, superintendents have cited financial issues as the most pressing challenge facing them in their work since 1950. Other documented practical challenges include accountability pressures, relationships between superintendents and school boards, managerial obstacles, testing and assessment issues, curricular changes, planning and goal setting, personnel, and the superintendent's role and visibility within the larger community (Glass & Franceschini, 2007, Table 1.5). A recent study of Texas superintendents found a similar set of problems and, further, a statistically significant relationship between superintendent tenure and the challenges of both school funding and personnel administration, suggesting the substantial negative influence of those problems on superintendents and their work (Trevino, Braley, Brown, & Slate, 2008). While superintendents face a common array of challenges generally associated with the profession itself, however, they may also face challenges that are closely linked to contextual factors.

***Contextual challenges associated with the superintendency.*** As a contextual feature, the setting in which superintendents conduct their work appears to influence some of the challenges they face. Lamkin (2006), for example, conducted grounded

theory research focused on the challenges uniquely associated with the work of superintendents in rural settings. Her research included 58 superintendents in rural school districts within the states of New York, Pennsylvania, and Tennessee. Her analysis of data collected through seven focus group sessions indicated that participants experienced the same set of challenges commonly associated with the superintendency as a professional role, but that they also experienced additional challenges that were specifically linked to the rural context of their work. They frequently described inadequate training and professional preparation necessary to execute specific job duties or apply specific professional skills required of them, particularly within the domains of law, finance, personnel, government mandates, and established board policies. Further, they described specific environmental challenges, including “the lack of specialized contact and experience with that environment, the lack of acculturation to the setting and expectations of the rural superintendent” (p. 19). Strikingly, participants in all three states repeatedly described themselves as a “jack of all trades” (p. 20), noting that the unique, rural context of their school districts required them to assume disparate professional responsibilities not expected of their counterparts in larger, urban settings. Unlike their urban counterparts, those rural superintendents were, in addition to the work commonly attributed to superintendents, directly responsible for pupil transportation, facility management, contracts, and other management areas. Consequently, they often felt ill-prepared for the range of responsibilities they held and pressured to attend to an unwieldy spectrum of duties toward which they had inadequate time to devote.

At the same time, superintendents in urban settings likewise appear to face specific contextual challenges. The Council of the Great City Schools (2006), a coalition

of nation's 65 largest urban school districts, outlined some of those challenges. Included among them is the substantially greater diversity of race, ethnicity, native languages, and socioeconomic conditions among students within their school districts. Urban superintendents face the challenge of ensuring that this diverse population of students demonstrates adequate academic progress in an era of increasing public accountability for demonstrable student achievement outcomes. They likewise face unique political pressures, often working to respond to disparate constituencies with conflicting interests and demands. Further, the size of their school districts substantially increases their visibility and scrutiny as public figures in the eyes of government bodies, private businesses, community organizations, and the media.

While setting represents one contextual factor that influences the challenges facing superintendents, personal characteristics represent another. As described earlier, a growing number of female and non-White candidates are accessing the superintendency (Kowalski et al., 2011). Existing research suggests that gender and ethnicity present unique contextual challenges for superintendents. In their survey research of 39 female superintendents in Illinois school districts, for example, Van Tuyle and Watkins (2009) found that participants faced particularized challenges associated with family responsibilities, gender discrimination, and lowered self-confidence in their leadership skills and behaviors. Some respondents further reported that those challenges were significant enough to trigger their attrition from the superintendency. More broadly, female superintendents often face contextual struggles related to gender stereotypes and sex-role norms (Dana, 2009). In much the same way, non-white superintendents may face unique contextual challenges associated with ethnic stereotypes and racist beliefs

(Revere, 1986). The growing number of female and non-white superintendents, accompanied by the lack of research into their particular experiences, presents a pressing need to understand their experiences in the role (Alston, 2005).

Finally, highly individualized circumstances also represent contextual variables that shape challenges facing some superintendents. That is to say, contextual variables specific to a given school district and the superintendent's work there may raise unique situational challenges. Two contributions to the literature best illustrate that phenomenon. Bogotch's (1995) case study research described a female superintendent in the southeastern United States, Kathleen Connors, who was selected to fill the position after the school board failed to identify a suitable candidate even after a national search lasting seven months and the employment of two temporary superintendents. Desperate to fill the role, the school board hired Connors in a split vote without the traditional involvement of typical constituencies in the school district, creating dissension among board members and friction among constituents from the onset of her superintendency. Almost immediately, she was immersed in a hotly contested sales tax referendum about which she had little prior experience or expertise. Despite her successful advocacy for the referendum, board frictions escalated. One member who disagreed with her appointment to the superintendency criticized her efforts on behalf of the tax referendum in the local newspaper. Ultimately, Connors' beliefs and style as a leader conflicted with the broader political culture of her district, and she faced a series of challenges in her work there that ultimately eroded her working relationship with the school board. Garza's (2008) autoethnography explored formidable challenges associated with the practical demonstration of his leadership values as a superintendent in the face of unique

social, political, and cultural opposition and conflict. Shortly after his unanimous appointment to the superintendency, he found himself deeply entrenched in a conflict between the school board and a district administrator who alleged that her reassignment was the result of gender discrimination. During the following month, he found himself at odds over the issue of salary stipends with a teacher whose husband was a powerful politician with substantial influence over the results of school board elections.

Garza wrote that the “incident was the beginning of a persistent effort to defame me. From this moment on her husband's main focus was to create enough support on the school board to remove me” (p. 165). Conflicts between Garza and the school board grew, and they were mirrored by his growing conflicts with members of his administrative team. Ultimately, he was able to successfully navigate those challenges, but his story helps to illustrate how unique and often unpredictable circumstances may create pressing situational challenges for superintendents.

*Challenges associated with entry into the superintendency.* Beyond common and contextual challenges associated with the superintendency, other challenges are specifically associated with the entry into the position. Particularly for some novice superintendents, inadequate formal preparation for the responsibilities and demands of the position makes their entry especially difficult (Baldwin, 2007; Gray, 2005; Hess, 2003; Murphy & Vriesenga, 2006; Swindle, 2005). Further, Kowalski, Petersen, and Fusarelli (2009) found in their study of first-time superintendents that 17% had completed no academic program leading to professional licensure for the position. Notwithstanding issues of preparation, however, superintendents entering the position are often challenged by their school boards' inadequate planning and preparation for a change

in district leadership (Sweeney, 2007). Despite Hargreaves' (2005) argument that school districts should more carefully plan for changes in leadership, many do not because they lack sufficient financial resources and an adequate understanding of its importance (Sweeney, 2007). At the same time, there exists limited guidance for outgoing superintendents about the ways in which they can accomplish their successful disengagement and set the stage for the smooth entry of their successors (Keane & Follo, 1996). Perhaps due at least in part to those factors, superintendents often experience initial confusion or disorientation as they enter the position (Jentz & Murphy, 2005). They often face conflicting demands for their time, attention, and action. They “plunge into 'the work' without taking a casual and informal 'just-a-few-minutes-on-the-fly' approach to sizing up the situation” (pp. 739-740), and they quickly become over-extended. Superintendents may also find that they lack adequate time or opportunity to learn about the important social and organizational context of their work and school district (Lytle, 2009), and many find that expectations for their work and roles change substantially as they move through the entry period (Cox & Malone, 2003).

Orr (2006) appears to have offered the only well-delineated list of challenges associated specifically with superintendent entry available in scholarly literature. Her focus group research found that entry challenges are most commonly related to the nature of the work itself, developing relationships with the school board, budget and financial issues, power and politics, learning about the culture of the community and school district, the history and expectations of the school district, learning about the role itself, and unique challenges like balancing work and family obligations (p. 1375). For each of those domains, she presented themes and cited specific examples emerging from focus

groups. Though her data are now nearly ten years old, they represent the only genuinely thorough explication of challenges associated with superintendent entry available to date.

### **Leadership Succession Literature**

The vast majority of existing research contemplates leadership succession almost exclusively as an organizational cycle and, consequently, largely ignores the lived experiences of incoming leaders. As a result, the knowledge base is heavily weighted toward the organizational side of leadership succession and rather under-informed about the personal experiential side of leadership succession. Further, available literature focuses predominately on succession in corporate and other settings outside the field of public education. In their exhaustive critique of leadership succession literature produced between 1994 and 2004, Giambatista, Rowe, and Riaz (2005) described the current status of theory in succession literature as “fragmented and variable” (p. 981). They observed that non-diversified United States manufacturing firms were the primary setting for leadership succession studies. They lamented the lack of useful theoretical lenses in existing studies and encouraged future researchers to seek better integration of leadership succession research. The following sections summarize the dominant theoretical models traditionally used in leadership succession research, describe studies of transition support for new superintendents, describe the small collection of studies that have specifically explored superintendent entry, and highlight literature advocating for the connection of socialization theory to the study of leadership succession.

**Dominant models for leadership succession research.** Following Gouldner's (1954) early consideration of the relationship between executive succession and bureaucracy, and of succession as a process, two dominant models for the examination of

leadership succession as an organizational cycle ultimately emerged within subsequent literature. The first model, attributable to Gordon and Rosen (1981), considers succession as a process that spans the period of time before and after a new leader arrives within the organization. In their model, the researchers advocated for close consideration of a fixed set of pre-arrival and post-arrival factors in efforts to understand the organizational nature of succession events. The Gordon and Rosen model has been used to study superintendent succession as an organizational event. Ortiz & Kalbus (1998), for example, applied the model to their case study research and argued from its findings that succession should be viewed as an organizational process with indefinite beginning and ending points.

The second model, attributable to Miskel and Cosgrove (1984; 1985), likewise emphasizes pre-arrival and post-arrival factors, but extends the Gordon and Rosen construct by also examining the organizational effects of leader succession. The Miskel and Cosgrove model adds to Gordon and Rosen's pre-arrival factors (reason for succession, selection process, reputations of leaders, orientations of leaders) and post-arrival factors (demography, organizational structure, school culture, educational programs, successor actions, community, school effectiveness) a third set of succession effect factors (changes in reputations, orientations, arrival factors) in order to provide a more robust model for understanding the organizational dimension of leadership succession (1985, Table 1). The Miskel and Cosgrove model remains the most frequently used in studies of organizational succession in school settings, largely because it has proven both conceptually sound and empirically effective at distilling, organizing, and



clarifying the organizational causes, effects, and characteristics of leadership succession (Hart, 1991).

**Studies of transition support for new superintendents.** Several studies have examined the process by which new leaders are assimilated into organizations and the effectiveness of support systems for new leaders during succession events. Manderscheid and Ardichvili (2008) found evidence suggesting the effectiveness of facilitated assimilation as a technique for helping new leaders acclimate successfully to new organizations. Facilitated assimilation proved especially helpful in the domains of communication, learning, expectations, relationships, and stress. In turn, several studies have suggested the positive effects of purposeful mentoring for new superintendents (Alsbury & Hackmann, 2006; Crippen & Wallin, 2008; McClellan, Ivory, & Dominguez, 2008; Orr, 2007). Key findings among these studies suggest that well-conceived relationships between new superintendents and mentors, the provision of adequate time for mentoring, facilitated reflection, mutual and ongoing training, and clearly-defined expectations for mentoring activities add value to mentoring programs for superintendents and improve their effectiveness as support systems during participants' entry into the role.

**Studies of superintendent entry.** Without question, doctoral dissertations represent the most prevalent source of research examining the personal experiential dimension of superintendent entry within leadership succession literature. The availability of dissertations on this topic has somewhat improved over the past decade, suggesting a promising trend in the consideration of this dimension of the topic. Several dissertations have examined the importance of the transition period to subsequent success

in the position (Shaps, 2009), as well as the extent to which new superintendents develop formal or informal entry plans to facilitate their transition into the position. Gray (2005), for example, reported that, while participating incoming superintendents assigned great value and importance to the entry period, very few developed formal entry plans to guide their entry efforts. Instead, they typically relied on informal entry plans or only tentative notions about transition strategies they hoped to pursue during the entry period. Among participants, 76% described having strategies to facilitate a successful entry, though only 32% of those participants actually developed formal entry plans. The remaining 68% reported formulating thoughts about entry strategies but did not formalize them as written plans. Notably, nearly 60% of the study's participants reported that relationships with their employing school boards received their greatest attention and effort during the entry period. In the same year, Martinez-Perez (2005) reported very similar findings from a study of superintendent transitions in rural, suburban, and urban school districts throughout California. Likewise, Roughton's (2007) mixed methods research corroborated those findings two years later, and added the observation that incoming superintendents frequently identified challenges associated negotiating the politics of the superintendency during the entry period.

Other dissertations have examined the specific experiences and challenges of superintendents during the entry period, though they predominately concentrate on participants in California and do not feature samples that typify superintendents nationally. Hernandez (2005) reported that over 50% of California's practicing superintendents planned to retire by 2010. Consistent with Roughton's (2007) conclusions, she also reported that incoming superintendents commonly experienced

difficulties with political challenges during the entry period. Along with those political challenges, participants struggled to negotiate financial challenges. She also suggested that the unique situational contexts of school districts appear to influence the nature of challenges incoming superintendents experience and the strategies they apply toward their resolution. Notably, she also observed that conceptions of the entry period's duration varied among participants, raising questions about the exact time frame for that experience. Swindle's (2005) research into the entry experiences of California superintendents found that participants frequently described inadequate academic, professional, or other formal preparation specifically focused on the entry period. While their preparation may have been broadly useful in their work, it did not specifically or adequately address the unique demands of the entry period. Verdugo's (2005) research, which drew from the same data set used by Swindle, additionally observed that superintendents relied predominately on previous professional experience in the absence of specific preparation for entry into the superintendency.

In the only notable, related study conducted outside California, Sovine (2009) studied the challenges facing Virginia superintendents and the strategies they used to mediate those challenges during the entry period. Participants in Sovine's study reported experiencing challenges around four domains during the entry period, including school finance, time management, instruction and accountability standards for student achievement, and public relations. Participants reported the use of communication, mentors, vision, and professional networking as dominant strategies for mediating those challenges. A strength of that research was its attendant focus on common, contextual,

and entry challenges facing new superintendents, though the study's findings were limited by a sample that included only four incoming superintendents and their three mentors.

A handful of remaining dissertations have studied highly individualized topics, including the dual perspectives of outgoing and incoming superintendents on the transition process (Sweeney, 2007), the differing approaches and experiences of new and veteran superintendents during entry into the position (Benson, 2008), and the extent to which appropriate transition plans are contingent on the organizational trigger for leadership succession (Kasper, 1997). While these selections offer instructive perspectives on the issue of superintendent entry, they do not exhaustively consider the topic, and they reflect some limitations, discussed below, that necessitate additional study.

Two more recent studies are also instructive to the topic of superintendent entry. In the first, Sutton, Banks, Brown, and Chapman (2010) conducted case study research that examined the transition activities of two outgoing North Carolina superintendents in preparation for the arrival and entry of their successors. They found that:

Formal transition plans existed in neither school district, though both participants indicated that some informal transition activities were underway. Among them, three were most common, including, in order of thematic prominence, (a) discussions or plans for discussions with successors, (b) the preparation of briefing or informational notes and documents for successors, and (c) the execution of specific personnel actions prior to the arrival of successors. (p. 16)

Both participants anticipated that their successors would face substantial challenges related to school finance and new legislation affecting public schools, while one participant also predicted situational challenges for her successor. Notably, the study

found that “little or no purposeful or planned [transition] coordination existed between the... two outgoing superintendents and their respective boards of education” (p. 20).

In the second, Sutton (2010) conducted case study research less than one year later that examined the entry experiences of the two successors to the first study's participants. It explored the challenges those successors actually experienced during entry and the extent to which their predecessors influenced their entry planning and conception of those challenges. Issues of school finance represented substantial challenges for both participants. Beyond that shared experience, however, important differences emerged between participants with regard to their overall entry experiences. Those notable differences appeared to hinge on participants' disparate career trajectories and suggested that previous experience as an assistant or associate superintendent is an important entry asset for incoming superintendents. Findings also suggested that coordinated transition work with their predecessors may be of much greater value to incoming superintendents who lack previous service as assistant or associate superintendents.

**Socialization theory and leadership succession.** Two additional contributions to leadership succession literature are particularly important to this study. Both sought to connect socialization theory to the study of leadership succession. Hart's (1991) critical synthesis of leadership succession literature highlighted the ways in which dominant models like that of Miskel and Cosgrove (1984, 1985) have informed organizational perspectives on the succession cycle, but argued that the “dynamic interactions among social and personal factors examined by socialization theories, however, are under-emphasized by traditional succession frameworks” (p. 451). She demonstrated how a

stage framework, not unlike the one Miskel and Cosgrove established for examining the organizational dimension of succession, might be used to leverage socialization theory toward a better understanding of the personal experiential dimension of succession, thereby offering a complementary perspective to the one traditionally explored in the literature. Hart discussed three stages of socialization as they might be applied to interpreting and understanding the personal experiential dimension of school leader succession. During the arrival or encounter stage, the new leader must “confront and accept the reality of the social setting... and of new relationships with superiors” (p. 459), and new leaders must reconcile their expectations for the role with its attendant realities. During the adjustment stage that follows, school leaders seek role clarity, resolve ambiguities, reconcile themselves to the organizational and cultural realities of the role, and begin to form (or re-frame) interpersonal relationships with those around them. During the subsequent stabilization stage, “stable patterns begin to emerge from socialization” (p. 460) and new leaders may begin to experience the first signs of professional self-actualization. Hart concluded that:

Succession and socialization are two sides of the same process involving the same people – the one side focusing on the group's influences on the newcomer, and the other interested in the newcomer's influence on the group... Organizational socialization theory and research lay a strong foundation for the expansion of knowledge about the succession of school leaders and include a better understanding of the relationship between these two important school needs. (p. 469).

Orr, whose 2006 study is the only published scholarly effort toward a detailed articulation of entry challenges facing superintendents, relied on Hart's application of socialization theory as a central component of her study's conceptual framework. She explained that socialization “comes from oneself, the expectations of others, the norms of the profession, and the specific organization. Such influences are facilitated by the degree of clarity and consistency among them and hindered by ambiguity and conflict in their expectations” (p. 1367). In that sense, the socialization of superintendents, like all leaders, includes both professional and organizational dimensions (Hart, 1993; Heck, 1995, as cited in Orr). It entails the challenges associated not only with accepting and internalizing the norms and culture of the new group to which they belong, but also with learning what is expected of the leadership role by the organization itself. Orr's extension and application of Hart's earlier work connecting socialization theory to leadership succession produced an insightful and important contribution to the field and demonstrated how research of this type may better inform and complement the traditional study of leadership succession as a purely organizational event.

### **Limitations of Existing Research**

While published research provides a rich, descriptive context for this study, there are several limitations within the literature that problematically limit current knowledge about superintendents' lived experiences during their entry into the position:

1. Existing literature predominately examines changes in the superintendency from the perspective of leadership succession as an organizational cycle (Hart, 1991). Dominant frameworks for the examination of transitions in the superintendency have been developed to examine the precursors to succession and the impact of

succession on school organizations (Gordon & Rosen, 1981; Miskel & Cosgrove, 1984, 1985), but relatively little attention has been paid to the lived experiences of superintendents who enter the position during an organizational succession event. As a result, little is known about this phenomenon. Its purposeful exploration is necessary in order to fill an existing gap in the literature, complement existing knowledge of the topic, and better inform aspiring and incoming superintendents, boards of education, policymakers, and the academic community.

2. The limited base of literature that does specifically explore the experiences of incoming superintendents during entry often relies on small samples commonly situated within single states or particularized settings (Roughton, 2007; Sovine, 2009; Sutton, 2010; Sutton et al., 2010; Sweeney, 2007). While these studies contribute some understanding to the research problem, their sampling limitations necessitate further study of the topic to either corroborate or disconfirm their findings.
3. Several studies have specifically sought to explore the entry experiences of superintendents, but many are limited by the threshold they applied by defining the entry period as lasting only 90 to 120 days (Hernandez, 2005; Martinez-Perez, 2005). They appear to have established that threshold based largely on historical tradition or adaptation from studies conducted in the private corporate setting. Regardless of the rationale, such a delimitation unnecessarily constrains study of the phenomenon to a time period that may be insufficient to realize the full range of complexities associated with superintendents' entry experiences. Examining



those experiences with an extended conception of the entry period may offer deeper insight into the phenomenon.

4. While recent doctoral dissertation research has given greater attention to the phenomenon of superintendent entry, many of those studies overemphasize quantitative data collected through survey research designs (Gray, 2005; Verdugo, 2005). As a result, they have produced only limited perspectives on the personal, lived experiences of incoming superintendents. Capturing the voices of participants through phenomenological research is necessary to tell their stories and fully describe the richness of their experiences.
5. A further limitation is the fragmentation of studies within the literature. While many studies of the topic exist, they individually examine only isolated aspects of the broader phenomenon. Some studies have examined succession as an organizational cycle (Hart, 1991), while others have examined the demographic characteristics of superintendents (Glass & Franceschini, 2007; Kowalski et al., 2011). Some studies have examined challenges commonly associated with the superintendency (Nestor-Baker & Hoy, 2001; Orr, 2006; Trevino et al., 2008), while others have examined specific contextual challenges (Bogotch, 1995; Garza, 2008). Some studies have examined challenges associated with superintendent entry (Baldwin, 2007; Cox & Malone, 2003; Gray, 2005; Hess, 2003; Murphy & Vriesenga, 2006; Swindle, 2005), while others have examined how superintendents respond to problems of professional practice (Sovine, 2009). No studies, however, have sought to examine these interconnected issues holistically. As a result, the existing knowledge base is fractured and incomplete.

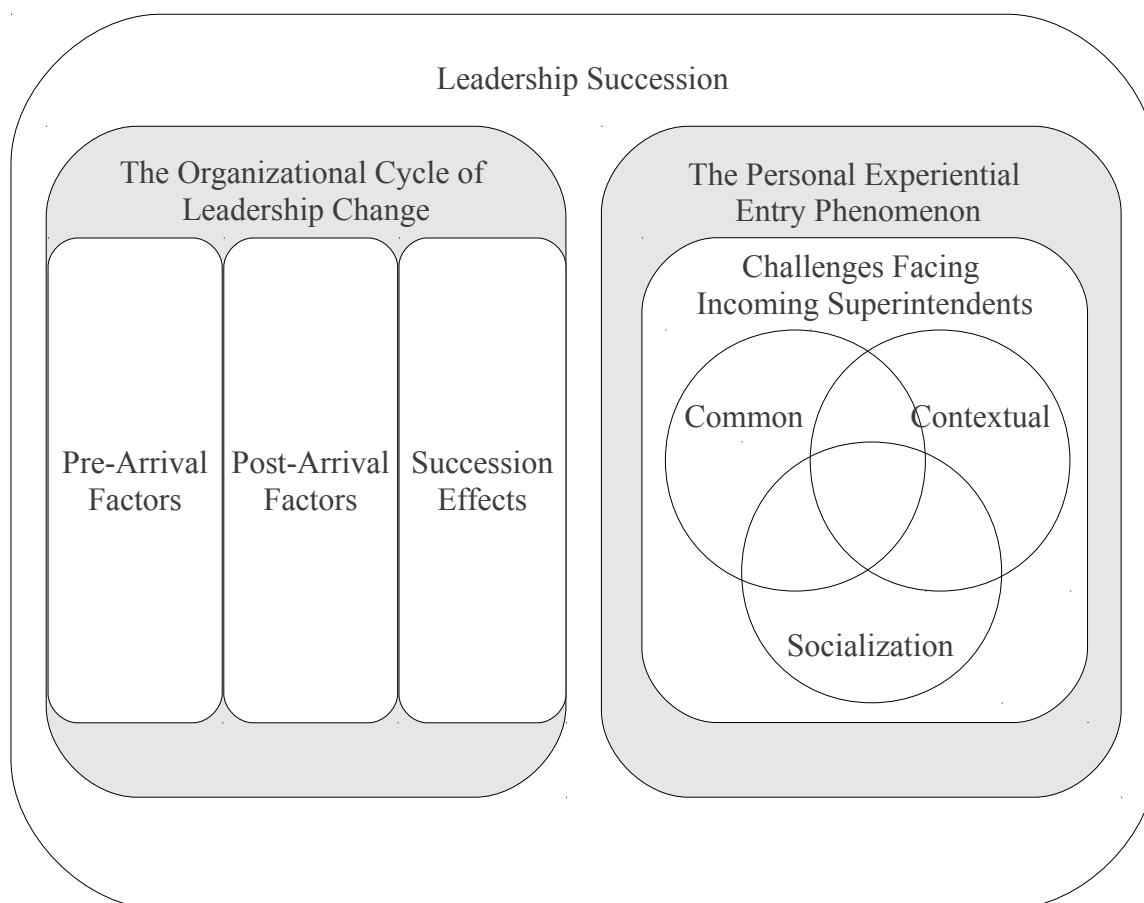
6. Finally, while Orr (2006) attempted a comprehensive delineation of challenges faced by superintendents during entry, hers is the only scholarly, published study to do so. While others since that time have also examined the topic, none have provided sufficiently detailed findings to either corroborate or disconfirm Orr's results. The existing literature base therefore lacks sufficiently robust, descriptive research to complement Orr's contribution.

## **Conceptual Framework**

The literature discussed in this chapter informed the conceptual framework that guided this study and influenced the interpretation of its results. As described earlier, the abundance of literature contemplates leadership succession as a one-dimensional process through its almost exclusive contextual focus on organizations. However, leadership succession is actually a two-dimensional process. A well-integrated model for leadership succession recognizes both dimensions (see Figure 1). The organizational cycle of leadership change is one dimension of leadership succession; the personal experiential phenomenon of entry is the second dimension of leadership succession. That is to say, leadership succession is at once both a group phenomenon for the entire organization and an individual phenomenon for the incoming superintendent. For incoming superintendents, entry represents the personal experiential dimension of leadership succession. To understand the entry experience is to inform the overlooked second dimension of leadership succession.

The evolving role of superintendents and the social, institutional, and leadership demands they face make their work remarkably challenging. Those challenges originate within multiple domains of experience and circumstance. While some common challenges appear linked to the nature of the superintendent's professional role, other challenges appear linked to contextual features like personal characteristics, organizational features, and situational factors. As they acclimate to new positions and assimilate into new organizations, incoming superintendents may experience not only common and contextual challenges, but also others that are linked to the entry experience itself. Further, these types and sources of experiential challenges may intersect and

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework



*Figure 1.* Leadership succession is a two-dimensional process including both an organizational dimension and a personal experiential dimension.

overlap in complex combinations that make their resolution more difficult. For example, challenges commonly associated with school boards may collide with socialization challenges associated with role relationships to present in unexpected and substantially perplexing ways during the entry period. Likewise, contextual challenges associated with locale may serve to magnify or exacerbate challenges commonly associated with state and federal accountability standards. This study sought to understand how

incoming superintendents experience and mediate challenges as they negotiate entry.

Toward that end, it principally focused on the personal experiential entry phenomenon often neglected in the broader canon of leadership succession research literature.

### **CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY**

This chapter presents a detailed description of methodology used throughout the study. Following a review of the research purpose and questions, the chapter describes the study's research design, participants, data collection procedures, and data analysis procedures. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the researcher's role in the study.

#### **Research Purpose and Questions**

The purpose of this study was to describe how incoming superintendents experience entry into the position. It specifically sought to develop an understanding of how they plan for entry and characterize challenges associated with the entry experience. An important goal of the study was to identify and describe strategies used by incoming superintendents to overcome challenges they encounter during entry into the position. This study sought to answer the following research questions:

1. How do incoming superintendents plan for their entry into the position?
2. What challenges do incoming superintendents associate with their entry into the position?
3. Are there variations in those challenges based on the personal characteristics of incoming superintendents and the features of their organizations?
4. What strategies do incoming superintendents use to mediate challenges associated with entry into the position?
5. What value do incoming superintendents assign to those mediating strategies?

## **Research Design**

Creswell (2007) described qualitative research as inquiry into “the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem” (p. 37). He further identified nine distinguishing characteristics of qualitative research, including:

1. Natural setting;
2. Researcher as key instrument;
3. Multiple sources of data;
4. Inductive data analysis;
5. Participants' meanings;
6. Emergent design;
7. Theoretical lens;
8. Interpretive inquiry; and,
9. Holistic account.

Qualitative research is particularly well-suited to examining complex problems requiring a nuanced, sophisticated understanding that can “only be established by talking directly with people, going to their homes or places of work, and allowing them to tell the stories unencumbered by what we expect to find or what we have read in the literature” (p. 40).

Within the field of qualitative research, phenomenological studies seek to broadly describe the lived experiences of a group of individuals around a specific phenomenon and to characterize commonalities among those group members (Creswell, 2007, pp. 57-58). Characterizing those commonalities deepens understanding of the phenomenon itself and meaningfully informs related policies and practices (Creswell, 2007).

Phenomenological studies seek to understand patterns of experience and meaning shared

among participants. The choice of a phenomenological design supported the study's purpose to describe incoming superintendents' entry experiences with depth and clarity in order to improve the experiences of future entrants to the position. Methodological choices for the study were consistent with standards and practices for phenomenological research and ultimately sought to ensure the trustworthiness of its findings (Moustakas, 1994).

### **Participants**

Twenty incoming superintendents leading public school organizations in four southeastern states participated in this study. Participants were drawn from Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Tennessee. They included both novice and veteran incoming superintendents to ensure that the sample reflected variations in professional backgrounds and entry experiences that could have been lost by limiting the study to only those superintendents entering the role for the first time. The study was delimited to include only incoming superintendents employed in traditional school district settings. Incoming superintendents serving in non-traditional or special purpose school organizations were excluded from the sampling frame due to the highly specialized settings for their work.

Participants had held their active superintendent positions for 18 or fewer months at the time of their participation. The sample was purposefully delimited to incoming superintendents who had served in the role for 18 or fewer months in response to an observed limitation in existing studies that have examined entry only during superintendents' first three to four months in the position, unnecessarily constraining their perspectives to a narrow window of experience. Extending that threshold to 18 months



provided for a greater longevity of perspective among participants without sacrificing the substantive accuracy of their personal stories. Because interviews probed contextualized, process-oriented personal events and experiences that were important to participants, not extraneous details or minutiae that are subject to memory decay over time, the risk of forgotten or misremembered experiences, even after as many as 18 months, was negligible. Interviews probed participants' autobiographical memories. As Hoffman and Hoffman (1994) observed:

...autobiographical memory is so permanent and so largely immutable that it is best described as archival... Archival memory, as we conceptualize it, consists of recollections that are rehearsed, readily available for recall, and selected for preservation over the lifetime of an individual. They are memories which have been selected much as one makes a scrapbook of photographs, pasting in some and discarding others. They are memories which define the self and constitute the persona which one retains, the sense of identity over time... They consist of those special memories which, because of their relevance to our conception of ourselves, have been reviewed and pondered to the point that they have become indelible. (pp. 124-125)

While the inclusion of 20 participants was greater than in some studies of this type, it is consistent with general guidelines for qualitative research (Creswell, 1998, as cited in Mason, 2010; Creswell, 2008). Mason (2010), for example, found a modal and median sample size of 20 participants, and a mean sample size of 25 participants, among 57 doctoral dissertations utilizing a phenomenological design. The inclusion of 20 participants allowed for the construction of a purposeful sample that accurately mirrored

documented characteristics of the national population of practicing superintendents. It also provided a broad data set to inform findings around each research question and ensured saturation. Saturation occurs at the point when additional data collection becomes unlikely to produce additional perspectives or new information (Mason, 2010) and was fully achieved in this study through in-depth interviews with 20 participants.

The selection and inclusion of participants, as well as the rationale upon which those decisions are made, are important considerations in qualitative research. The following sections describe the purposeful sampling approach used for the study; the process by which participants were identified and recruited; and, their demographic characteristics, professional backgrounds, and organizational contexts.

**Sampling.** While random sampling helps quantitative researchers to generalize their findings to a population, purposeful sampling enables qualitative researchers to deliberately select participants whose voices and contributions promote a rich, detailed understanding of the study's central phenomenon (Creswell, 2008). In order to capture the experiences and perspectives of a sample that reflected the characteristics of superintendents as a national population, proportional quota sampling guided the selection of study participants. A proportional quota sample reflects “the major characteristics of the population by sampling a proportional amount of each” (Trochim, 2006, “Nonprobability Sampling,” para. 8). A sample was drawn to proportionately match the national population with regard to gender (male or female); ethnicity (white or non-white); age range (age 45 or younger, age 46 to 59, age 60 or older); locale (rural, town, suburb, city); and, point of entry into the superintendency (internal or external). In order to ensure the availability of an adequate number and variety of participants, the

study's sample was drawn from four target states, including Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Tennessee.

**Identification and recruitment.** Construction of the study's sampling frame began with participant referrals from the four target states. The Georgia School Superintendents Association, North Carolina Association of School Administrators, South Carolina Association of School Administrators, and Tennessee Organization of School Superintendents, along with state education agencies in the target states, were invited by email correspondence to refer prospective participants. Correspondence with those groups included an overview of the study's purpose, a description of its inclusion criteria, and a copy of the informed consent statement so that recipients could make informed and confident referrals. Requests to those groups produced 113 referrals of prospective participants. Of those, four referrals were eliminated upon receipt based on their employment in non-traditional school districts.

Each of the 109 prospective participants was contacted individually via email correspondence that included an overview of the study's purpose, identification of the referral source, a copy of the informed consent statement, and an initial invitation to participate (see Appendix A). As an incentive, the initial invitation also explained that one participant would be randomly selected to receive a \$50 cash reward payable to a non-profit education foundation in his or her school district. Six initial invitations were returned as undeliverable; in those cases, duplicate information was faxed to recipients' offices. Recipients of the initial invitation were invited to indicate their interest in participation, or their preference to opt out and receive no further correspondence regarding the study, via completion of a short online questionnaire (see Appendix B).

The questionnaire was delivered via an SSL-encrypted website to ensure the privacy and security of respondents' submissions. Invitees were also assigned and used a random unique identifier to submit their questionnaire responses to further ensure their privacy. Respondents indicating an interest in participation also provided personal information around the sample's five demographic variables, confirmed that they met the study's 18-month inclusion criterion, and indicated their personal preferences for method of contact and interview format.

Of the 109 recipients who received an initial invitation to participate, 70 responded for a return rate of 64.2%. Of those 70 respondents, 50 indicated their willingness to participate and 20 stated a preference to opt out of the study. Of the 50 respondents willing to participate, five self-reported that they did not meet the study's 18-month inclusion criterion. Upon confirmation, those five respondents were disqualified, leaving a sampling frame of 45 members. A sample of 20 participants was drawn from that sampling frame to match the national population's distribution across the five demographic variables described earlier and to balance participant representation across the four target states. Upon their selection, participants were contacted for enrollment in the study, and individual interview appointments were scheduled. Upon enrollment, participants were provided an anticipatory set of discussion topics so that they had the opportunity to prepare for their interview sessions (see Appendix C).

During data collection, one participant was unable to keep his scheduled interview appointment and withdrew from the study without further explanation. After four unsuccessful attempts to contact him by telephone and email correspondence, he was

replaced with an alternate participant from the sampling frame with similar demographic characteristics to ensure the integrity of the sample.

**Description of participants and their contexts.** The following sections describe the distribution of participants across the sample's five demographic variables, provide a brief summary of their professional backgrounds, and offer a short overview of their organizational contexts in order to inform the appropriate transferability of the findings to the broader population of incoming superintendents.

***Demographic distribution.*** Purposeful selection of participants from the sampling frame sought to achieve a demographic distribution within the sample that matched the demographic distribution of the national population across five variables, including gender, race/ethnicity, age band, locale, and point of entry into the superintendency (see Table 1). For the purpose of this study, race and ethnicity were collapsed into the bimodal categories of white and non-white. Age bands corresponded to those used in previous national studies of superintendents (Glass & Franceschini, 2007; Kowalski et al., 2011). Locales corresponded to those adopted by the National Center for Education Statistics (n.d.) for use with the Common Core of Data.

Table 1

*Demographic Distribution of National Population, Sampling Frame, and Sample*

Demographic Category	National Population % <sup>a</sup>	Sampling Frame %	Sample %
Gender			
Male	76	78	75
Female	24	22	25
Race/Ethnicity			
White	94	82	80
Non-white	6	18	20
Age Band			
45 or younger	15	24	20
46 to 59	67	69	70
60 or older	18	7	10
Locale			
Rural	56	69	65
Town	18	20	20
Suburb	20	4	5
City	6	7	10
Point of Entry			
Internal	67	40	55
External	33	60	45

<sup>a</sup> National statistics for gender, race/ethnicity, age band, and point of entry were reported by Kowalski et al. (2011). National statistics for locale were reported by Provasnik et al. (2007).

***Professional backgrounds.*** Participants commonly held a wide variety of positions in public education prior to their appointment to the superintendency. Among them, 85% previously served as teachers, 60% previously served as assistant principals,

75% previously served as principals, and 75% previously served as assistant or associate superintendents. Several participants held other positions in public education, including substitute teacher, teacher assistant, coach, speech-language pathologist, chief financial officer, and a variety of director roles at the district level. Characteristically, 45% of participants followed a traditional, linear career trajectory into the superintendency, sequentially holding positions as teachers, assistant principals, principals, and assistant or associate superintendents before ultimately entering the superintendency. Two participants entered public education following their retirement from successful military careers in the United States Armed Forces. While 85% of participants were novice superintendents, 15% were veteran superintendents new to their school districts. Participants uniformly held at least masters-level college degrees; 65% of participants held doctoral degrees. All participants, including those who transitioned into public education following distinguished military careers, described their previous professional experience as highly formative and helpful toward their preparation for the superintendency.

***Organizational contexts.*** Participating superintendents were employed in school districts ranging in size from approximately 1,000 students to approximately 150,000 students ( $M = 21,173$ ,  $Mdn = 6,448$ ).

During interviews, participants were invited to share any contextual information that they believed was important to understanding the nature of their school organizations and their work within them. In response, they shared a broad range of perspectives. Most frequently, they spoke about distinctive features of their communities, often describing how poor local economic conditions had led to increased poverty among

families and children served by their school districts. In several cases, they linked worsening economic conditions within their communities to inadequate local school funding capacity and described the difficult realities of everyday life in communities struggling with prolonged economic recession. Whether they described their communities as rural or metropolitan, traditional or progressive, participants consistently viewed them as distinctive and regarded them with a sense of appreciation. Even when citing problems within their communities, participants described them warmly and noted their positive features in tandem with their difficulties. Many celebrated their warmth and friendliness and noted their traditions of strong support for local schools.

Several participants also emphasized that multiple school districts operated within their counties. While dual city-county school districts were most common among those respondents, one reported the concurrent operation of five individual school districts within his county. One participant described how his community still struggled with the aftermath of a contentious consolidation of multiple school districts in his county decades ago. Two participants described adversity and contention between their own school districts and charter schools operating in their communities. Participants commonly offered observations about the importance of student achievement in their school districts, with roughly equal numbers describing patterns of low, mixed, and high student performance on high-stakes tests.

Participants offered mixed observations about their school boards. While some described strong, effective school boards, others described “volatile,” “turbulent,” or “dysfunctional” school boards. They likewise offered mixed perspectives about their predecessors. Some commented about their predecessors' positive influence on the



school district, while others cited specific ways in which failures of leadership among their predecessors had led to problems within their school districts or communities.

### **Data Collection Procedures**

In-depth semi-structured interviews with participants provided the data for this study. The following sections describe the processes by which an interview protocol was adopted, informed consent was obtained, interviews were conducted, and participants were protected from any potential harm associated with information they shared.

**Interview protocol.** Glesne (2005) described many of the complexities associated with collection of interview data in qualitative research. As she explained, interviewing participants “is a human interaction with all of its attendant uncertainties” (p. 67). It requires careful attention to the development of probative questions that balance focus on the research topic with the flexibility to pursue conceptual tangents that may ultimately prove meaningful to the study. At the same time, it also requires attention to the setting of the interview and attributes of the interviewer in order to establish rapport with participants and facilitate the meaningful exchange of information, perspectives, and experiences (Oelofse, 2011). For those reasons, a written interview protocol was developed to guide interviews conducted throughout this study.

The development and use of a written interview protocol is widely supported in qualitative research methodology (Creswell, 2007, 2008; Glesne, 2005). The protocol commonly includes “instructions for the process of the interview, the questions to be asked, and space to take notes of responses from the interviewee” (Creswell, 2008, p. 233). A preliminary protocol, adapted from available models (see Creswell, 2007, p. 136 and Creswell, 2008, p. 234), was developed for use during participant interviews.

Consistent with common standards, it included a space to record logistical details about the interview, a core set of questions to guide the interview, space to record field notes, and prompts to share descriptive information about the study and interview session with participants (Creswell, 2008).

Creswell (2007) also recommended pilot testing interview protocols before their adoption for operational use in qualitative data collection. Pilot testing was completed with two practicing superintendents who had held their current positions for more than 18 months but fewer than five years to replicate the sample but avoid the unintentional inclusion of potential study participants. Prior to pilot testing, the purpose of the activity was explained to participants, the study's purpose and research questions were reviewed, and participants affirmed their informed consent to participate (see Appendix D). During pilot testing, the preliminary interview protocol was used to conduct a complete individual interview with each practicing superintendent. Field notes were recorded on the preliminary interview protocol form and audio recordings were created for both sessions. A debriefing session immediately followed each pilot interview. During the debriefing session, each pilot participant was asked to evaluate the clarity and sequence of interview questions, to appraise their alignment to the study's purpose and research questions, to characterize their psychological and emotional comfort during the interview, and to offer additional suggestions that might improve the interview protocol. Review of audio recordings from both sessions was used to evaluate the effectiveness of interviewing techniques and to ensure that questions effectively probed for responses that were instructive to the research questions. Feedback from pilot participants and review of audio recordings informed minor adaptations to the preliminary protocol. Following

those revisions, a final protocol was ultimately adopted for consistent use throughout data collection (see Appendix E).

**Informed consent.** As Seidman (1998) observed, ensuring the informed consent of participants extends well beyond simply securing their signatures on informed consent statements. In order for participants to provide truly informed consent, they must fully understand the nature of their participation in the research, the risks and rewards they may accrue through that participation, and their rights as participants. While appropriate informed consent statements provide participants meaningful information about each of those concerns, participants also have the right to ask questions about their participation in research studies and to have those questions answered to their satisfaction before consenting to participate.

Due to the probative nature of interview questions, the sensitive nature of participants' responses, and the very public nature of the superintendency, the researcher took special care to ensure the informed consent of all participants. An informed consent statement (see Appendix F) was distributed to all participants at three times during the study. A copy of the statement was included in participants' initial invitation to participate; a second copy was provided to all participants upon their enrollment; and, a third copy was presented to all participants at the beginning of their individual interview sessions, at which time its contents were orally reviewed. On each occasion, participants were invited to ask questions about the document and the nature of their participation the study. Three participants raised informational questions about their participation, which were answered to their satisfaction. Each participant affirmed informed consent by signing and dating the statement prior to the collection of interview data.

**Interview procedures.** One in-depth, semi-structured interview was conducted with each participating superintendent. The purpose of the interview was to explore participating superintendents' entry experiences as they related to the study's research questions. A standard interview protocol, previously described in this chapter, guided those interviews. All interviews were scheduled on dates, at times, and in locations that balanced the convenience, preferences, and comfort of participants against the progress of the study. Face-to-face interviews were conducted with 17 participants. Among them, 16 were conducted in participants' offices and one was conducted in a private meeting room at a conference center near the participant's workplace. Telephone interviews were conducted with three participants who either expressed a preference for that format or who were unavailable for face-to-face interviews. All interviews were audio-recorded to ensure the accuracy of data collection (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). The researcher prepared a verbatim transcript from the audio recording of each interview. Participants were provided a copy of their respective interview transcripts and were invited to review them for accuracy. They were also invited to provide any additional information they wanted to offer in order to clarify or elaborate on their responses to interview questions (Creswell, 2008; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). No participants amended their transcripts.

**Participant protection.** Because probative interviews like those conducted for this study “ask participants to reconstruct their life history as it relates to the subject of inquiry,” they may “share aspects of their lives that, if misused, could leave them extremely vulnerable” (Seidmann, 1998, p. 49). It is therefore especially important that qualitative researchers take deliberate steps to safeguard the rights, privacy, and safety of participants. Throughout this study, the confidentiality and privacy of all participants

were protected. Participants were assigned random unique identifiers upon their initial invitation to participate; all participant data was identified using those codes throughout the study. Neither participants nor their school districts have been named herein so that their actual identities are not revealed. Likewise, neither the findings nor discussion include contextual information that might indirectly identify participants. Audio recordings of participant interviews, interview transcripts, written field notes, and other derivative materials produced throughout the study will be maintained securely and destroyed five years after its completion.

### **Data Analysis Procedures**

Huberman and Miles (as cited in Creswell, 2007) observed that qualitative data analysis is an adaptive, iterative process designed to promote discovery and adjusted in response to changing conditions and emerging understanding during the research process. Data analysis procedures used for this study reflect Creswell's (2007) view that "the analysis process conforms to a general contour" that represents a sort of "data analysis spiral" (p. 150). They included active engagement during the interview process, review of written field notes, careful preparation and review of interview transcripts, creation and use of researcher memos, coding of interview transcripts, identification of emergent patterns and themes, and description of those patterns and themes through the voices of participants. Member checking improves the trustworthiness of qualitative research findings (Creswell, 2008; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). It "is a process in which the researcher asks one or more participants in the study to check the accuracy of the account" (Creswell, 2008, p. 267), and was conducted twice to ensure trustworthy observations and conclusions about the data.

The researcher actively engaged in each participant interview, listening carefully to participant responses and collecting written field notes on the interview protocol form. Creating audio recordings of each interview freed the researcher from the need to capture every detail of participants' discourse and therefore enabled him to think interpretively and critically about participant responses during individual interview sessions (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Written field notes provided a mechanism to record observations about participant anecdotes, experiences, and perspectives that seemed striking or noteworthy during interviews and to revisit individual interview sessions during subsequent steps in data analysis. They also offered a reference point for beginning to recognize the meaning participants assigned to their experiences (Lofland & Lofland, 1999).

Upon completing each interview, the researcher reflected on participants' narratives and initially identified conceptual elements related to each research question. Written field notes were referenced to improve recall accuracy (Lofland & Lofland, 1999). The researcher prepared a verbatim transcript of each interview recording, listening for conceptual elements related to each research question during transcription. Member checking was completed for each participants' respective transcript to ensure its accuracy (Creswell, 2008; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Participants were also invited to clarify or elaborate on their responses, at their discretion.

Researcher memos aid in the exploration of qualitative data (Agar, as cited in Creswell, 2007; Miles & Huberman, 1994). The researcher reviewed each transcript and reflected on its content in order to clarify, revise, and further identify conceptual elements related to each research question. Following the review of individual transcripts, a

researcher memo summarizing the participant's experiences around each research question was prepared.

Researcher memos, transcripts, and written field notes were reviewed in order to identify and describe dominant categorical experiences and recurring themes in the form of a “super” researcher memo. Those categorical experiences and themes were reconciled against elements of the study's conceptual framework to ensure the appropriate use of a sound theoretical foundation during data analysis. Consistent with the recommendation of Kvale and Brinkmann (2009), a master code sheet delineating families, codes, and definitions was developed from the dominant categorical experiences and recurring themes identified in the “super” researcher memo (see Appendix G).

Coding allows researchers to identify and mark segments of data with descriptive names, helping to isolate specific elements of content and associate them across transcripts in order to identify patterns of meaning (Creswell, 2007, 2008; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Individual transcripts were coded using *Atlas.ti* and the master code sheet. Throughout the coding stage, codes were expanded, collapsed, and revised on the master code sheet to ensure the appropriate identification and classification of transcribed text segments (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

After transcript coding was complete, the researcher queried the coded transcript set to compile quotation reports for each code. Sub-themes were identified within codes. A snapshot of dominant categorical experiences and recurring themes was prepared and distributed to participants for member checking (Creswell, 2008; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Participants were invited to appraise the extent to which that snapshot broadly captured and resonated with their own individual experiences. The presentation of

findings in chapter four explicates dominant categorical experiences and recurring themes, grounding their interpretation in quotations that capture participants' voices and authentically relate their personal stories (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994).

While these data analysis procedures were explicitly instructive to the first, second, third, and fifth research questions, an additional level of analysis was necessary to inform findings around the fourth research question. In order to identify variations in experiential challenges based on participants' personal characteristics and organizational features, the researcher created a frequency matrix juxtaposing identified challenges against participant demographics. The resulting matrix was used to disaggregate the prevalence of experiential challenges based upon demographic variables.

The Qualitative Research Group at Western Carolina University, an affiliation of researchers with scholarly experience and interest in qualitative research methodology, conducted an external review of data analysis procedures to ensure that they led transparently and accurately to trustworthy results. As part of that review, the researcher provided a written description of data analysis procedures and exemplar artifacts produced at each stage of analysis for external critique. The researcher also answered questions from members of the external review team during a one-hour meeting with the group. The team concluded that data analysis procedures were rigorous and thorough, and that no procedural revisions were necessary.

### **Role of the Researcher**

As a doctoral student in the field of educational leadership and as a practicing human resources director in a public school setting, I have an informed understanding of the role and context of the superintendency. I was the principal investigator for



qualitative case study research that examined how two outgoing North Carolina superintendents planned for their departures from the position and for the entry of their successors during the transition period (Sutton et al., 2010). I also previously conducted qualitative case study research that explored the entry experiences of two incoming North Carolina superintendents, the challenges they faced during the entry period, and the influence of their predecessors' transition work on their entry experiences (Sutton, 2010). This previous research experience informed the perspectives I brought to the current study.

Because the researcher is the primary data collection instrument in qualitative research (Creswell, 2007; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009), it is important that he acknowledge biases and assumptions that may affect his understanding of data and interpretation of its meaning. Therefore, several of my preexisting beliefs about the entry experiences of superintendents should be disclosed:

1. The challenging nature of superintendents' work and its immediate demands on their time and attention afford them little opportunity to think reflectively about their entry experiences. For that reason, it was appropriate to probe deeply during participant interviews in order to move participants beyond a superficial reaction to contemporaneous pressures and toward a deeper description of the broader nature of their experiences during entry into the position.
2. Superintendents are widely expected to be expert leaders, and for that reason may be uncomfortable describing experiences that they believe make them appear weak, ill-prepared, or tentative during their entry into the position. For

this reason, deliberate steps were undertaken to cultivate and maintain a warm, comfortable, inviting, and professional atmosphere during interview sessions in order to reassure participants that their narratives were valid, legitimate, and worthwhile. For the same reason, ensuring that participants fully understood the confidential treatment of their personal stories was likewise important.

3. The phenomenon of superintendent entry is complex and dynamic, and it may vary based upon contextual and personal factors. The entry period is a particularly difficult and challenging time in the superintendent's tenure. Further, individuals who are traditionally under-represented in the superintendency, including superintendents who are female or non-white, may face special challenges.
4. Finally, I have developed a sincere appreciation and respect for the superintendency as a profession and, especially, for the persons who fill that role. For that reason, I was sensitive to their individual stories and have sought to recount them in a way that not only uncovers the nature of their experiences, but also values them. In order to ensure the authentic and trustworthy interpretation and description of participants' experiences, I utilized the conceptual framework as an interpretive lens and carefully grounded the presentation of findings in the actual voices of participants.

## CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to describe how incoming superintendents experience entry into the position. The study specifically sought to develop an understanding of how they plan for entry and characterize challenges associated with the entry experience. An important goal of the study was to identify and describe strategies used by incoming superintendents to overcome challenges they encounter during entry into the position. Toward that end, this study sought to answer five research questions:

1. How do incoming superintendents plan for their entry into the position?
2. What challenges do incoming superintendents associate with their entry into the position?
3. Are there variations in those challenges based on the personal characteristics of incoming superintendents and the features of their organizations?
4. What strategies do incoming superintendents use to mediate challenges associated with entry into the position?
5. What value do incoming superintendents assign to those mediating strategies?

This chapter presents detailed findings for each research question. It is organized around research questions to ensure purposeful and specific treatment to each. Due to their complexity, findings for the second, third, and fourth research questions are further organized by subsections that delineate major concepts evident in participants' descriptions of their lived experiences during the entry period. The chapter concludes with a summary that encapsulates the complex, nuanced phenomenon of entry into the superintendency.

**Research Question 1: Planning for Entry**

Participants' appointment to the superintendency signaled the onset of busy, often intense preparation for the work that lay ahead in their new positions. Importantly, participants almost unanimously conceptualized the entry period as beginning upon their appointment to the position, not upon their first official day of work in the position. This section presents findings about participants' entry into the superintendency following their appointment. It describes the duration of transition time between participants' appointment to the superintendency and first day of work, participants' development of plans to guide their entry, and the nature and scope of participants' planned entry activities.

On average, 2.9 months elapsed between participants' appointments to the superintendency and their first day of work into the position. For some, that transition time was as brief as only two to three weeks; for others, it extended up to six months. Participants most frequently reported a transition time lasting two months. Two participants reported serving as interim superintendents for several months before accepting their permanent appointments to the position. Two others accepted their appointments to find that their employing school boards accelerated their entry into the position by unexpectedly advancing their anticipated start dates. One of those participants accepted the superintendency in December with an anticipated start date of July 1, but his employing school board subsequently asked him to begin on January 1 instead. Struggling with the difficulties of relocation from another state, he negotiated a new start date of February 1. Another participant, appointed to the superintendency in February, expected to enter the position upon her predecessor's planned retirement on

July 1. When her predecessor opted unexpectedly for an early retirement, her start date was advanced by two months, and she entered the position on May 1.

Every participant described engaging in entry planning of some kind. Four participants described the development of informal entry plans that loosely identified a few key priorities for their work during the entry period. One participant, for example, considered a few key organizational issues like filling vacancies within his leadership team, while another identified an early set of organizational goals he tentatively hoped to achieve throughout his first year in the position. Others described making a few handwritten notes, outlines, or checklists for themselves and orally sharing progress reports with members of their school boards.

Sixteen participants, however, engaged in formal entry planning and detailed in writing the specific activities that would guide their entry into the position. While two participants noted that their school boards required the development and presentation of a formal entry plan as part of the selection process, fourteen participants created formal entry plans based on their belief that those plans held intrinsic value as blueprints for a successful entry experience. Participants reported first learning about entry plans from books about school leadership, former colleagues, and other sources. One, for example, described drawing on the advice of a consultant and using an Internet search engine as he developed his entry plan:

A national consultant... had given me the idea of an entry plan and given me a format... After I was officially hired here, I did a computer search – a Google search – of superintendent entry plans. I had several models, so I just kind of pulled from all of those...

Some participants sought specific advice from other superintendents about the scope and content of their entry plans. One participant, for example, sought the perspectives of the superintendent in her previous school district and the interim superintendent in her new school district as they framed the contents of her formal entry plan:

I utilized the talents of my superintendent at the time in [my previous school district]. She sat with me and helped me to put that together. And then the interim that was here – I got him to review it and assist me also. So, he would be able to say, “Now, this is what you all came up with, but if I were you, I wouldn’t take that on right now...” He was trying to help me to narrow the scope, because there was so much work to be done – I could not take on everything at one time.

At the same time, several participants sought the advice and perspectives of colleagues and direct reports in their new school districts as they developed their entry plans, attempting to ground their plans against others’ organizational experience and ensure that their efforts appropriately attended to important organizational considerations.

Fundamentally, participants’ entry planning efforts were aimed at their own successful assimilation into their new school environments. As one participant explained, “My entry plan was really focused on listening, observing, and getting to know people... I think that’s just very important for a new superintendent, to just sit back for a minute and learn – listen and learn.” Participants sought to learn about a broad range of topics from a wide variety of sources. They often worked to learn simultaneously about school district operations, the effectiveness of school programs, organizational culture and traditions, and the broader context of their new communities. As one participant explained:

I had done a little bit of research on the county before applying, but in that period of [transition] time between November and January, I did a lot more research on our state board website on performance data, got more in detail into some of the things I had already looked at. I drove up here several times and met with the superintendent and toured the schools and tried to start meeting community leaders, politicians, staff, parents... I attended the board meetings in December to get a feel for that...

Her engagement with a variety of stakeholders was typical among participants. Another recalled:

I actually came here for four days in January. I wanted to attend a board meeting, and this board meets for a caucus on Monday and a board meeting on Thursday, so I was here... [for] one week in January just to see them in action. And then I began to interview, starting with the board people individually... I asked that I talk to the people that reported to me one-on-one... I would like to have talked to every principal one-on-one, but we've got 21 or 22 principals, so I didn't have time to do that. I got to talk to some of them... I addressed the chamber of commerce... We gave a seat to everybody who came in and said we want your feedback... What I asked in these interviews was, "What are... the strengths of the district... and what are the areas we need to work on or improve?" So, I learned a lot just by taking notes and listening to people...

Participants' formal entry plans ranged in sophistication from thumbnail sketches of basic goals and activities to highly evolved blueprints for complex, multifaceted engagement within and beyond the school organization. At their most basic level,

rudimentary entry plans loosely identified strategies like meeting and talking with a random assortment of colleagues in the participant's new school organization, speaking to audiences at community gatherings or meetings of community organizations, visiting schools, or reviewing organizational documents like budgets, student achievement reports, and approved program plans. In those cases, participants identified general goals and approached them casually but deliberately. As one participant recalled:

I was here those three weeks, just sort of looking around and talking to staff and trying to decide what my focus goals should be... talking with staff to discern what's their level of experience and what would be the makeup of my cabinet...

More sophisticated entry plans were more thorough and strategic in their conception and were also more systematic, structured, and transparent in their execution. One participant, for example, imposed substantial structure by planning a series of entry activities during 12 “transition days” that were provided in his employment contract with the school board. He described an abundance of tightly scheduled meetings and conversations with constituents and members of his new school organization, many of whom were thoughtfully identified with the assistance of his predecessor and others within his administrative team:

I had 12 transition days that were actually included in the contract I signed... so, I was taking leave from [my job in another state] and coming down here... between April and June... It was pretty tightly scheduled... I had written an entry plan, and a big part of the entry plan was just who I needed to meet. And I was able to get most of those initial meetings covered in the transition days, including individual meetings with board members, individual meetings with senior staff... meetings



with each principal. I met with a number of community leaders in different settings. I attended some community type meetings, like... an industrial management council meeting, which was a bunch of industry leaders in [this community] talking about their workforce concerns. I had other meetings like that – the chamber of commerce, I met folks there. So, it was a mixture of school system leaders and community leaders. I met with the sheriff and with the chief of police. I met with the county manager. I met with the city manager. I met with our state senator...

At their most sophisticated, participants' formal entry plans carefully identified key constituents and stakeholders for formal meetings and one-on-one interviews; featured extensive reviews of carefully selected organizational documents and reports, some of which were specifically created in response to entry plan requirements; explicitly linked entry activities to short- and long-term organizational improvement goals; and, established formal mechanisms for communicating goals, progress, and outcomes with internal and external audiences. One participant, who arguably developed and executed the most sophisticated entry plan described during the study, discussed how his approach to entry planning had evolved over time:

When I first got my first [superintendency], I asked my superintendent, “What am I supposed to do now?” And he goes, “Well, you might want to listen to some folks and see what's going on.” And that was my first entry plan! By the time I got to my second one, I said, “That was important,” but I didn't know what I was doing. So I put my questions together... and then I've refined them over the time.

Upon accepting a new superintendency and reflecting on his prior experiences in other school districts, he overtly applied a strategic and systematic orientation to his entry planning efforts. He negotiated with the school board a contractual provision guaranteeing him 90 days to develop and deploy an entry architecture aimed at equipping him with essential knowledge about the school district's operations, performance, culture, assets, and needs that he ultimately used to frame key leadership decisions during his early tenure in the school district. Toward that end, his entry plan defined a qualitative research study through which he engaged in semi-structured interviews with a variety of stakeholders and members of the school organization:

I took 25 principals and I listened to them. I talked to every department head here individually. I listened to the heads of the teacher organization. I listened to a few influential community members that were identified. And I asked the same questions to all of them... In reality, it's a research study. It's an interactive, qualitative analysis. I studied every accountability report, every financial document, the budget – everything I could find off the website – but that just told me the *quantitative* side of the story. It didn't tell me... the story that was attached.

After conducting interviews with over 100 carefully chosen individuals, he methodically coded interview data and prepared a formal analysis of key findings that he shared with the school board and with other audiences both inside and outside the school organization. He also used those results to guide his subsequent decision-making. His analysis helped him to identify the most influential figures outside the school organization, and he subsequently initiated multiple meetings with them to forge positive relationships. He promoted new colleagues who were identified as the most revered to

significant leadership positions within the school organization, and he hired others outside the school organization as lobbyists and consultants. He used the results of interviews and document analysis to forge a blueprint for organizational improvement initiatives that would define his new superintendency. He emphasized the importance of a well-conceived, thorough entry plan, noting, “If you don't do this, it may take you two or three *years* to figure this stuff out.”

While the scope of his entry plan was atypically sophisticated, it nevertheless reflected what most participants sought to achieve through their formal planning efforts: an engagement strategy that produced early, formative perspectives about their new school organizations necessary to succeed in their new leadership roles. Despite the varying degrees of structure they brought to them, participants commonly viewed their entry activities as opportunities to learn about and assimilate into their new school organizations in order to prepare for the challenges awaiting them in the superintendency.

### **Research Question 2: Challenges**

Challenges facing incoming superintendents during the entry period are complex, varied, and abundant. Analysis of participants' interview data revealed challenges that may be thematically grouped into 17 experiential categories ranging in scope from the strictly occupational to the deeply personal. Table 2 delineates those 17 experiential categories and indicates their prevalence among participants. This section explicates each experiential category, starting with those most prevalent among participants and progressing toward less common challenges.

Table 2

*Prevalence of Challenges Identified by Study Participants*

Experiential Category	<i>n</i>	%
School finance	14	70
Demands on the superintendent's time	14	70
Personal costs associated with the superintendency	14	70
Local community	13	65
School boards	13	65
Organization's leadership team	12	60
Political challenges	11	55
Knowledge deficits	10	50
Organizational change	9	45
Media	8	40
Role relationships	8	40
Superintendent's predecessor	7	35
Situational challenges	7	35
Student achievement	7	35
Sense of isolation	6	30
Organizational deficits	6	30
Personnel administration	6	30

**Challenges associated with issues of school finance.** Fourteen participants described challenges associated with issues of school finance. Reductions to school district funding from state and federal sources represented substantial obstacles they were forced to manage upon their entry into the position. For one, that challenge and his efforts to manage it began immediately upon his appointment to the superintendency. He recalled, “On February 1, I was sworn in at 8:30 AM. At 9:00 AM, we had a three-hour budget meeting with a committee, talking about how to reduce the budget by several

million dollars for this year.” Several participants remarked that they entered the superintendency during what one called “the worst budget time that we could have ever known.” Others stressed the magnitude of budget reductions by citing specific cuts they faced. Two participants in small, rural school districts were forced to manage \$5 million budget reductions, while another in a large, metropolitan school district faced a \$62 million reduction. Another participant cited a 9% reduction to state appropriations for public school operations in his district. Another still put a human face on his budget reduction: in his school district, 100 positions were eliminated due to budget reductions, 50 of which were absorbed through natural attrition and 50 of which were achieved through employee layoffs. One participant described the difficulties of maintaining after-school programs for needy children when the funding for that program was cut from \$100,000 to only \$20,000. “Well, what can you do with \$20,000?” she asked. “You can’t have an after-school program for \$20,000 a year. How many teachers are going to stay for that kind of money?” Numerous participants offered similar figures to emphasize that the cuts they faced were historic in their magnitude.

While managing unprecedented state and federal cuts to public school funding was challenging enough, participants observed that the challenge was exacerbated by similar cuts in previous years. Their challenge lay not in simply managing a one-time budget reduction, as hard as that may be. Instead, they managed those funding cuts after their budgets were already stripped bare by years of staggering reductions. One participant explained that his school district had reduced its operating budget every year since 2003. “The low-hanging fruit has been gone a long time – we’re into the tough stuff now,” he explained. Emphasizing his level of concern, he added, “I don’t see an end in

sight. I haven't seen the light at the end of the tunnel yet.” Another commented, “We overcame the budget challenges last year, and we're just going to have to turn around and do it again.”

Participants described the challenge of managing state and federal school funding reductions as both difficult and painful. One incoming superintendent recalled the difficult realization that he would be forced to eliminate jobs in order to manage the budget reductions he faced:

[The previous] superintendent... retired on March 1, so the only budget preparation that had been done was a proposal for local budget. So, I had to take over and got us through deciding where cuts had to be, which was very painful... and, I found myself thinking, this is a tough position to be in because... I'm going to make some decisions... I am going to be the one recommending people to lose their job. There was just no getting around it.

Another incoming superintendent worried aloud that his school district might be unable to absorb a reduction of 400 employees through natural attrition alone, saying, “I'm not convinced yet... People would do *anything* to avoid layoffs... 'cause it's *painful* laying off people.” For these participants, and for others, budget reductions and employee layoffs were challenging not only at an organizational level, but also at a human level. Their difficulty was both managerial and emotional: even as they took necessary steps to bring their budgets into balance, they experienced substantial emotional distress as they initiated unavoidable reductions in force that left many of their colleagues unemployed.

Several participants explained that reductions to state and federal funding were exacerbated by inadequate capacity to raise local revenue for school operations and

capital programs. As one explained, “We are gaining, on average, 500 students a year. And, we have no money to build schools. And so, we have exhausted seats in the area of the county where the growth is occurring the most.” As a result, his students attended classes in over 200 trailers, or “mobile classrooms,” scattered across school campuses throughout the county. He described how lack of local funding capacity has crippled his school district's ability to meet demand for new school facilities created by student growth:

There's been no money to build. Our county itself is in dire straits. You know, we do not have a lot of industry in [this] county. We are a very rural county, so the major source of income or revenue is the property tax. And the commissioners are very hesitant to raise taxes... and there's no help from the [state or federal] government.

Some participants observed that the same economic deterioration triggering cuts at the state and federal levels also existed within their local communities, rendering them unable to generate local revenue to support their schools. One noted, “Our property values have declined this past year by about 14%, which was a significant hit to our millage rate.” Another explained:

Our local tax digest in a single year declined by 15%. With the loss of revenue that we experienced, we just have not had the means to meet even some fundamental facility needs – heating and air... The writing's been on the wall that this is going to be an increasing challenge to be able to meet some fundamental needs... things like roof repairs that we know are in the near future.

Many participants described an overarching sense that they were constantly asked to undertake more initiatives and achieve greater results with less and less school funding each year. As one participant explained, “We're asked to do more and more every year with less, and that's part of our dilemma.” Another participant echoed that sentiment, saying, “I don't see how they can keep giving us mandates and less funding, and expect us to do what they want us to do.” For participants already challenged by dwindling funds from state and federal sources and by inadequate local capacity to generate school revenue, unfunded and underfunded mandates were especially problematic and frustrating. One incoming superintendent, whose state's receipt of funds through the federal Race to the Top grant program required the implementation of new teacher evaluation procedures, lamented the difficulty of implementing the new evaluation process without adequate funding to support it:

One of the things that bothers me tremendously is the impact we feel. We earn three supervisors. We don't even earn assistant principals, and we've had to hire additional staff to accomplish hundreds of observations and all the post-conferences and paperwork that goes along with an observation and an evaluation. We've had to hire extra staff just to accomplish the evaluation process that they've asked us to do. I don't think they realize the financial impact they're having by their mandates, and yet they never increase the funding. Our federal funding has decreased. The First to the Top [sic] funding sounded great when it first came along, but we got \$186,000. That's all we got out of it. The state got millions. That's all you heard, was how much the state got because they were first to the top... and I'm sitting here getting \$186,000. That's all I got out of the whole



measly thing, and that was spread over four years. Well, what am I supposed to do with that? So, the financial impact that this has had... It sounds great to talk about the millions of dollars that First to the Top [sic] brought into [the state], but when you talk to me personally and the amount of money I got spread across four years, that's nothing.

Issues of school finance ran deep for these participants. Challenges associated with managing state and federal cuts, inadequate local revenue capacity, and unfunded mandates represented pressing challenges as they sought to lead their school districts through significant financial turbulence. Perhaps even more significantly, the compounding effects of budget reductions at the federal, state, and local levels, as well as the cumulative effects of reductions imposed across numerous consecutive fiscal years, left many participants with little optimism that conditions were likely to improve.

**Challenges associated with demands on the superintendent's time.** For fourteen participants, challenges associated with demands on the superintendent's time were substantial. For some, those demands were especially acute during their transition into the superintendency. Several were forced to split their time between their former positions and their new ones. One participant, for example, closed out the school year in his former role as a principal and, simultaneously, began leading the school district upon his appointment to the superintendency, leaving him little opportunity to devote adequate time to either set of responsibilities. Other participants similarly split their time during the transition period – often in different school districts and, in a few rare cases, in different states. In an extreme example, one participant was responsible for fulfilling his

former duties in another state *and* identifying his replacement there even as he worked to transition into the superintendency in a new state.

Beyond those acute time constraints during the transition period, participants described broader, persistent challenges related to demands on their time after they settled into their new roles. Participants frequently reported work weeks ranging from 70 to 80 hours; a few reported even longer ones. School board meetings, attendance at athletic events and other extracurricular activities, participation in after-hours events at schools, administrative retreats, membership on community boards, and service to non-profit organizations and councils consumed extensive amounts of time beyond their regular office hours. Further, several participants explained that the unpredictable nature of their work and the various exigencies commonly finding their way into the superintendent's office forced them to postpone the work they would have otherwise completed during their regular office hours. Consequently, they found themselves doing much of their routine work after hours, typically at home. As one participant explained, “the urgent overcomes the important... once you get on the job, the day-to-day things and emergencies take up your time.” He completed less time-sensitive work at home:

Now, what I end up doing is, I'll go home, and I'm an hour-and-a-half on the computer at night emailing, responding back to parents. And I'll take a lot of Sunday afternoons and do the weekend computer work – emails you know? If I have any written documents, any written work that I have to do, I have trouble getting it done here because of the day-to-day interruptions and meetings. I have to do that at night, at home. Any memos to the board, ultimately I do it at home at night, or I get up real early while my wife is still asleep and our children are out of

the house and I can get a lot done... I'll do a lot of my written work then, where I have to think. I can't get anything meaningful done from 8:00 to 4:00. I find that. I struggle. Either I'm not efficient enough, or there's too much coming at me, you know? I'd like to think there's too much coming at me because I've always been real prolific in churning out work. But that has been a real challenge. I have to go home to write anything that I have put any thought into because of all the interruptions.

Another incoming superintendent explained that time constraints associated with his work led him to be "on duty" around-the-clock:

Sometimes you are so consumed with the work itself, and then at 3:00 AM in the morning, you go, "I should've let my board know about that." And my board has said, "Why did we get an email from you at 3:30 AM in the morning?" That's because that's when I thought of it. That's when it came to my mind and I wanted to make sure you were aware of it.

Demands on many participants' time were largely attributable to the abundance and diversity of professional responsibilities associated with the superintendency. As one explained:

This place up here is nothing but multitasking. You've got 18 - oh, you can't put a number on it - you've got multiple things going on at once. You don't have the luxury of sitting down and taking care of one thing. Finishing it, and then getting to something else... You get into those days where, for one reason or another, it just seems to be a day that everything evidently is falling apart everywhere else and you're finding out about it up here.

For others, those demands were attributable to expectations that others held for their time and attention:

You're asked to speak to groups. You're asked to serve on all these different boards. I can't be in every place that there are [sic] in this small community... Every board wants to have a school superintendent on their board, and they seem somewhat disappointed when you send some other person as your designee, but I literally could go to meetings – my job could be filled up every day, all day, with going to meetings and community events and not really doing the work of the school superintendent, although I recognize that that is also a function of a school superintendent...

As another participant commented, “Everybody wants a slice of you,” and meeting those expectations placed considerable demands on participants' time. Paradoxically, they often embraced the very construct that imposed such substantial demands:

My presence means more than my presentation. I couldn't do everything. I couldn't be everywhere... but because I was new, I think some people just wanted me in every place. And so, what I soon learned was that me being in a room just sitting there saying absolutely nothing meant more than me sometimes being in a room giving a presentation. Because people value the fact that the superintendent would even spend time doing something like this – whatever the “this” was.

Broadly, participants experienced a dramatic increase in demands on their time upon accepting the superintendency. Through the transition period, they were often forced to divide their time between their former positions and their new ones. However, they found little relief even after the transition was completed. Rather, the unique nature

of the superintendency created likewise unique and persistent demands on their time from which they found little reprieve.

**Personal costs associated with the superintendency.** Fourteen participants described significant personal costs that challenged them emotionally, mentally, and physically as they entered the superintendency. For many, the stress accompanying the superintendency was a powerful personal strain. For one participant, the magnitude of the superintendent's responsibility led to panic, sleeplessness, and anxiety:

What was going through my head? Panic. You end up with a lot of sleepless nights... First and foremost, it's mostly knowing the responsibility that you have, and realizing the responsibility that has been placed upon you, because I am responsible for the safety, welfare, and education of 19,500 students and the safety of 2,300 staff members. 235 school buses on the road every day. It is paralyzing... When I said “sleepless nights,” I'm very sincere in that. It's the enormity, because you can't understand it until you experience it. You can intellectually know what the job is, but until you are the person who is responsible... it's not real. There is a *physical, on-your-chest weight* that you feel from that, and that's not an exaggeration.

For another participant, the magnitude of the job, coupled with her desire not to disappoint or disillusion those who so enthusiastically supported her appointment, led her to experience self-doubt, anxiety, and – ultimately – paralyzed inaction:

When you're appointed superintendent, you've got a board [and community] that have confidence in you... When I said “awesome” – it was like you want to pull the covers over your head the day they tell you you're superintendent. “Oh my

gosh, what have I done?” That responsibility, that “can I really do this?”... And the thing that I struggle with in this job is not wanting to let down the people that had the confidence in me that I could do this job... or feeling like they're going to find out that I'm not so great after all, that I really can't do it – that impostor syndrome, you know? That plagues me... I lived in fear of that to the point of paralysis sometimes. My board wants me to communicate, but I want to stress over getting it absolutely right before I send it. So, instead of sending the email like they expect me to do... I'm dragging along, and they're going to get irritated because I didn't communicate – because I want to make it perfect... I will be drawn to inaction... It's that these people who have this confidence in me, I'm going to let them know-- ...It would be such a big public failure in this fishbowl...

Her use of the word “fishbowl” to describe her life as a superintendent resonated in the experiences of many participants, who similarly described the personal discomfort and difficulty of living in the perpetual spotlight of public scrutiny. As one participant observed, “Your life is very much an open book – it's hard to hide” as a superintendent. For some participants, life in the fishbowl led to a sense of social alienation and personal detachment. One, in particular, argued that it is easier for her simply to have no friends than to overcome the pressure and awkwardness associated with friendships:

As a superintendent, you can have very few friends... You can't really just have people that you can kick back with because you have to be careful of everything you say, especially in a small community. In a small community, I know everything about everything going on in the schools. Well, people want to know that. But clearly you can't talk about those things, so... it's just easier not to have

any friends than to have to worry about what you say. You know? It's just... easier that way...

While friendships were her personal cost, other participants lost a sense of personal privacy in the constant spotlight of public attention and scrutiny. One participant's self-consciousness when picking up medical prescriptions or buying groceries suggests how de-privatizing the fishbowl can be for incoming superintendents. He worried how his actions and image even in conducting routine, personal errands might reflect on the school district:

You can't disappear. I mean, anywhere that I go – when I go get groceries, or when I go to the pharmacy – that pharmacist knows me, and I've been in contact with their kids. So, they know exactly what's wrong with me, too. I have to be careful about what type of prescriptions that I get... You can't go to the grocery store – just, anywhere you go, you're on point, you're on guard. I know I'm not elected, but it does become kind of similar to that because I have to become the face of the school district, and all of those things that I do become a part of the school district.

Another participant expressed much the same concern as he talked about the difficulty of having his professional role eclipse his personal identity:

You're always superintendent. When you're in the grocery store, you're the superintendent... you're always kind of in that role... I guess that's part of that profession, you know? That expectation that, as a professional, you always have to be aware of that. I don't want to say you can't let your guard down because that sounds too defensive... but you always have to be aware that that's how people are

looking at you. You're always representing the school system. You're always representing the board in everything you do and say.

As participants discussed personal costs like these, they spoke often of their need to achieve “balance,” to protect and maintain their personal lives, identities, and well-being while simultaneously succeeding in a professional role that caused them great physical and psychological stress, and to which they largely abdicated feelings of personal privacy and identity. Even as they spoke of the need to achieve balance, though, they described 80-hour workweeks, staying up all night to monitor situations unfolding in their school districts, skipping or canceling personal vacations, and neglecting important dimensions of their lives outside their professional roles. Also notably, they discussed specific ways in which their entry into the superintendency interfered with their family relationships. For external entrants to the superintendency, that interference was most notably attached to the difficulties of relocation upon their appointment. One participant described how she struggled to sustain active involvement in her daughter's life when she left her behind to relocate to her new school district:

I think it's probably harder for me because I had to leave my home. Some people assume the superintendency and they don't have to leave their city where they lived for twenty years, sell their home... I had to leave my daughter there with her father... And, you know, I'm very close with her, so the first six months, I was on the road to [my previous home] at least every other weekend, driving three hours back and forth every weekend to make every dance performance, every senior activity, everything... just trying to be her mom...



Forced to choose between the school board's aggressive time line for filling the superintendency and keeping his family intact, another participant acquiesced to the board's pressure and left his family behind in another state several hundred miles away:

...I was officially hired at a board meeting in December. The board initially said they could be... flexible on when I started. The problem was, I had a family in [another state]. I had kids in the eighth grade and a junior in high school, and when we checked the student schedules here, they just didn't fit at all. So, my kids were going to have to finish the year in [that state]. I didn't really want to leave my family any longer than I had to, but the board finally said, "OK, we want you to start by February 1. There's a lotta stuff's gotta get done. We need a superintendent." So, I told them I'd start February 1... so I was here from February 1 to the middle of June without my family.

For still another participant, a 900-mile relocation to accept a superintendency carried with it a profound personal cost that will perhaps forever occupy his thoughts:

Well, the first thing I did was come up with a timeline... So that was the big thing, that backward planning sequence from the time that I got here [to] start work and getting everything done to get my wife here. You can't get situated in a job and work at 100% if your wife and family are not situated, and so you've got to take them into consideration. Otherwise, the work you do in your job will suffer. And so, we went crazy for about six weeks, getting everything together to get down here to start by the twenty-fifth, you know... but the only thing I would do different is of a personal nature... because my wife was starting to have problems then, and we put it off 'til we got situated down here... and if we hadn't put it off,

we might have been able to find this cancer and done something with it. As it stands right now, I'm about ready to lose my wife. So, you know... that... that's what hurts me... We've prayed for miracles, and that's what it'll take. It's pancreatic cancer, and if we'd have diagnosed it, found out about it in August when it probably started, and not until New Year's when we got situated, it might've been small enough that they could've done something with it at that time... and I'd still have her... but unfortunately, it was inoperable by the time we found it, and it's basically in the process of taking over her entire body... um, and so, it's not a good time... We only have... I probably only have several weeks with her left. So... I'll always wonder...

Beyond relocation, some participants' inabilities to achieve a healthy sense of personal and professional balance interfered with family relationships. Describing the unique demands of the superintendency on his emotional, physical, and mental energy, one participant explained that he has little of himself left to share with his wife when he goes home to her at the end of the work day:

It's affected my personal life...because when I go home, I just... I just...

Sometimes, because the roller coaster ride's just been a little too dippy with highs and lows... I just have to unwind. I'm not a very moody person at all... but, I just sit down and I'm quiet and I'm... I'm just... I just don't... It's not that I'm grumpy or anything... it's just that I'm... I'm aloof... When I came home before, I could leave everything at school. I would go to school at 4:00 AM in the morning to grade tests, and I'd stay 'til 6:00 PM at night. And that was OK – when I went home, I

went home, and I could leave it all there. Well, you can't leave this there... It's different...

Another participant, similarly describing those demands, gratefully noted that he was able to spend time with his wife because she reluctantly attended football games at the district's high schools with him, but further explained that he would have less time to spend with her since she was unwilling to attend the upcoming season's basketball games. "I have to be sure that I save some time for her," he said, "Whether it's the weekend or even in the week, too." A veteran superintendent new to his current school district emphasized the importance of taking care of himself and maintaining a strong relationship with his wife, but then struggled to recall exactly when they had taken a vacation together:

I've got to make sure that, when we get to this summer, we find time to take a break... and not necessarily go to a conference in Florida and that be a break, but just take a break. That's my biggest thing – I'm trying to figure out the last time we took a vacation... Maybe three years ago... So, I want to make sure that some time this summer, we're doing something for me and her, and nobody else...

For these fourteen participants, the superintendency was associated with personal costs to their health and well-being. Viewed through another lens, such significant personal sacrifices may seem strange, even inexplicable. Viewed through their own lens of experience, though, those costs were the natural byproducts of the professional roles they held. The pressure that exists for them to succeed and to be seen as successful – whether that pressure originates from an external source, is entirely self-imposed, or results from some combination of the two – is real, is profound, and can powerfully shape

their behavior. That powerful influence is captured in one participant's memories of how that pressure to succeed caused her to jeopardize her own physical health:

If you're going to be the leader, you want to set the tone, and I don't like to be sick. I don't like to admit that I can't do everything. I can overcome this non-functioning gall bladder – I'll just show up at work every day... I was in a board meeting – and the disgusting and gross part of the gall bladder issue is that it makes you physically sick – and I'm sitting in a board meeting knowing that the dinner is not sitting well with me... And so I was thinking, "Thank God [she's] doing a long presentation." So I get up. I'm going out, and I get sick. I mean I nearly passed out in here. I thought I was going to vomit before I could even get in this office. The security officer... helped me get the door open because I think he felt I was going to pass out. I got sick. I said, "Please let me know when she starts talking about so and so... Please come and get me." So I come walking back in with a stack of fake papers in my hand to look like I left to come get something that I needed. I have just been in here violently ill, and I splashed my face with water, threw on some more lipstick, and got back out there... because you're a superintendent and you are in this position... you somehow must become superhuman... and it can lead superintendents down a path of destruction... I didn't want people to think that I couldn't handle the job, the superintendency, that somehow the superintendency made me sick. I was very self-conscious. I was very self-conscious of that, to the point that that overtook everything I was doing at the time...

**Challenges associated with the local community.** Thirteen participants identified challenges associated with the local community. For many, those challenges emerged as members of the community reacted with dissent and resistance to decisions and activities of the school district. In those cases, participants faced controversy, animosity, and resistance to their leadership efforts. One participant, for example, weathered significant public backlash upon recommending the closure of a small community school in an effort to manage substantial budget reductions:

Nobody's got a good perception when their school's closed. So, we had to publicly announce that that was a possibility. We had a public hearing at the school that was going to be closed. We had a public hearing at the school that most of those kids went to... We got chewed out for two-and-a-half hours at both of them. The people who think that's a good idea aren't going to come tell you.

The ones who think it's a dumb idea are going to come express that.

Another participant found herself mired in controversy when her district announced plans to build a new high school. Controversy erupted within the community as fears mounted that the new high school might somehow damage the existing high school's football program:

[I was shocked] by the reaction people have had toward our high school. We've had some pretty tough times here. We've had some ads in the paper and some pretty nasty things going on there for awhile... people posting things on the Internet and doing some pretty ugly things...

One participant described widespread controversy within his community over the issue of student assignment to the district's schools. Controversy swelled along partisan lines and

triggered the most expensive political campaign in the district's history as candidates competed to overturn seats on the school board. The school district was embroiled in a heated battle within the community, and the incoming superintendent was challenged to lead the initiative despite intense adversity and animosity among constituents.

While those participants experienced challenges when school district affairs spilled into the community as points of controversy, others inherited challenges more directly attributable to conditions existing within the community itself. One external entrant to the superintendency, for example, discovered deep racial division in his new community, a condition he attributed to the fact that school desegregation had been in place for only forty years:

There's still some hangups on race and equality and fairness that people still have. There's OCR complaints left and right, and they've been in the record for years. The biggest thing that caught me off-guard was the lack of trust and faith between races. As an example, the busing issue. If I could cut out picking up kids from within a mile-and-a-half of the school, it would save me about \$100,000 in fuel a year. However, for my minority population, they never had buses before, and they only got buses when integration took place because the white people at the time didn't want the black kids walking in front of their house to school. And so, to my minority population, busing is a right, not a privilege. And, so it's learning those specifics. That's what's the hardest thing for me to understand is the delaying integration and the untrust between races. That was tough. It still is tough.

Underlying issues of race within the local community likewise created challenges for another participant, who sought to change course curricula, alignment, and sequencing in

the school district's only high school. When she introduced the idea, she was threatened with the prospect of “white flight,” the possibility that affluent, white families in the school district would withdraw their children from the high school to enroll them instead in a local private school to avoid greater levels of ethnic diversity in their classes. “We were afraid of white flight,” she said, “if affluent, white children weren't in class with their friends and recognized as the top little class.” Consequently, her efforts to improve high school instruction evolved into a broader, more difficult debate about race, class, and privilege within her community and her school district.

Community conditions and expectations created complex challenges for one participant in an isolated, rural community. He described how gentrification, an eroding community infrastructure, and dwindling employment opportunities for high school graduates had shifted the community's expectations for their children's education. “We prepare kids to leave and never come back,” he said, adding:

Our challenges from an educational standpoint just keep growing exponentially because our smarter kids leave, and we're left with people who either didn't leave because they educationally didn't attain enough to get out, or they've inherited something that traps them here...

Whether they were borne of school issues that spilled into the community as points of controversy, or whether they emerged from underlying conditions intrinsic to the community itself, issues like these presented substantial challenges as participants negotiated the complex intersections of school and community.

**Challenges associated with school boards.** Thirteen participants described challenges associated with their employing school boards. Especially for novice

incoming superintendents, multiplicity was an important feature of those challenges. That is, participants struggled to negotiate a new type of supervisory relationship unique to the superintendency itself, one in which they must respond not only to a corporate body, but also to the varying, often disparate needs, preferences, and expectations of that group's multiple members. For some participants, the idea of having multiple “bosses” represented an abrupt and disorienting adjustment from the supervisory routines to which they had become accustomed throughout their careers in public education:

...if you're becoming a superintendent for the first time, you've had one boss. Well now, I have five... some people have nine. You know, you're going to have multiple bosses... on your board, and they all have an agenda that is personal to them, and then they have a collective agenda.

Some participants identified multiplicity as the greatest challenge of their entry into the role. Centrally, that challenge rested in the difficulty of simultaneously attending to the sometimes competing interests and viewpoints of school board members. Simply put, it was hard for incoming superintendents to balance and reconcile differing viewpoints among school board members with equal positional power:

...before, working in education, I've worked under principals, I've worked under assistant principals. I know what they want. I know... and I produce, and I do my job, and I get results... But when you deal with a board, they bring in different backgrounds and different viewpoints, and so it's much more difficult to try to ascertain what they want me to do, and how they want me to do it, and, as a board, making sure that... I'm doing what they want me to do. That has been the most difficult thing.



School board members often held different dispositions toward the working relationship between the school board and superintendent. They were also likely to identify different operational priorities for the school district and the superintendent's work. As one participant observed, the process of understanding and bringing some sensible balance to that multiplicity of viewpoints was protracted and difficult:

There were *lots* of conversations... Some board members were, “You're in charge – you run it. You come to us, get advisement, et cetera, and we will advise.” But, there were two or three board members who were pretty specific – one board member has really strong interests in wellness and health and safety, so she was sharing about some things in that arena. And so, for me, it was understanding what are some key points for certain board members, and what are some things that we – *I* – need to do in order to be successful?... While all of them want the same end results, obviously certain board members have certain... key points that they want to focus on.

Even more basically, some participants found it challenging to establish routines for communicating with school board members given their varying tastes and preferences. That challenge was especially pressing for one incoming superintendent given that the school board identified effective superintendent-board communications as a priority early in the selection process:

During the interview process, one of the overlying themes was communication. They didn't feel like they were communicated with well. And that was one of the things that I've always prided myself on, is communicating with my staff. I have learned that different board members like to be communicated differently. Some

are much more... I guess you could say... I don't want to say *needy*, but, you know, they, they require more one-on-one, more phone calls. There's a couple board members that I typically will call early in the morning because they have commutes, and so, while I'm driving and she's driving, I can call her and we can talk about things. Some board members just require an email. Some of them like to talk prior to the board meeting [about] any concerns that I have or any of that kind of stuff. But what I've tried to do is, I've tried to send out just a weekly email to them, you know, a weekly update.... just kind of keeping them involved... but then, you know, a lot of them will text and say, “Hey, when's a good time to talk?”

I hope that it's going well. I guess we'll see when the evaluation comes around.

He suggested with his closing thought a certain difficult reality for incoming superintendents adjusting to an environment where the constituent members of their school boards represented unique variables: he sought to understand those dynamics as well as he could, charted a course ahead, and then waited hopefully to see if it worked.

Negotiating the complex nature of the board-superintendent relationship was a recurring concern for participants. Even internal entrants to the superintendency who enjoyed generally positive preexisting relationships with their school boards worried about how their histories with the school board might impede that relationship in their new roles. Some internal entrants expressed concern that “negative publicity” surrounding efforts, initiatives, or activities they undertook in previous roles might resurface during their superintendency to create conflict with certain board members harboring residual bad impressions of their previous work. Beyond that concern, several participants also described deeper concerns about the nature of the board-superintendent

relationship – namely, how to properly conceptualize it given that they were concurrently both subordinate to the school board and responsible for providing it the leadership it needed in order to function effectively. On one hand, they viewed the board-superintendent relationship as protective in nature:

It is your job to protect... the board's interests... I think it's our job to help protect the board's interests so that the public will see that the board is working for them, not push the board out there and leave them out there – hang them to dry so that you can say, “Nah nah, that's what I told you.” No, no, no – it's just the opposite. You should, as superintendent, make sure that you're guiding them in the right direction so that, politically, they are always seen as a team, even with your differences in the background.

On the other hand, they also recognized that they were sometimes stewards and protectors of school boards fraught with internal dysfunction, and that their work was not only about protecting the board's interests, but also about moderating poor behavior among school board members:

To get my board to work as a team where, even if a measure is voted on by a three-to-two resolution, that the two people who didn't win, so to speak, they jump in and they support the three that did, and they don't go out and badmouth what you did... to get my board to accept that and to accept honesty and integrity and not to put up with lies, deceit, and individual agendas. That's a challenge for anyone to feel... and my board and I are just now getting to that point where we understand and trust each other. That's been a year-long growing curve.

Superintendents' efforts to redirect school boards and referee their individual members without damaging their broader relationships required a careful balance of strength and delicacy, candor and tact, leadership and deference. It required incoming superintendents to demonstrate a special skill set that they may, or may not, have developed in their previous professional roles. As one participant explained:

You need to be ready to deal with confrontation. You need to be able to be ready to manage adults – specifically, board members who may not always be on the same page – with the understanding that they are your boss. That can be *hard* – trying to manage your – I mean, you think about it, you're managing *your boss*... How do you facilitate dialogue and discussion with people? You know, they're on opposite odds, you feel like you're in the middle – how do I bring these people to the middle to get us on a common ground so that I can keep moving the organization forward? You need to be ready to do that.

Problematically, participants often found themselves entangled in those dynamics because, in their estimation, school boards represent fertile ground for conflict – not only within and among their constituent members, but also in their intersection with the communities they represent. One participant expressed surprise that even seemingly minor issues like the selection of a high school graduation date erupted in community conflict that the school board inherited – and that he was ultimately compelled to mediate and resolve. “It's not my job, it's not the school board's job to determine that,” he said. Nevertheless, the community's unrest translated into unrest within the school board, and he expressed frustration over the time, energy, and political capital he spent resolving the issue at the board level. That struggle challenged him on two levels – first, in resolving

the emergent issue, and second, in trying to reorient the school board away from operational issues like graduation dates that “in the end [are] not having an impact” and toward “the grand scheme of things... the goal and the vision and all of that.”

Likewise, participants discussed the challenge of negotiating issues associated with school boards' orientations toward their own purpose and work in the school organization. One participant described how his leadership evolved as a result of the school board's orientation toward taxation and local public school funding:

I think I've been able to step back from it and look at it in this new role as the leader of the district and as the go-between between the boards [of education and county commissioners]. The boards are looking at it like taxpayers – let's get a good program, let's get good money for our bucks, but let's take care of the taxpayer, too. And if we have to lay people off, lay. You know it's more of a bottom line approach from their perspective. My perspective is this other culture... then what about the children? You know, so you got that angle, that culture versus the other culture. They talk about us like we're just protecting our fiefdoms, our domains, and don't want to reduce any programs and that sort of thing.

The issue of board continuity compounded these difficulties for some participants. Because school board members are elected for fixed terms of office, the composition of school boards can change rapidly and, sometimes, dramatically. Turnover of school board members can introduce volatility that represents a new level of challenge for incoming superintendents as they try to understand school board dynamics, develop

relationships with school board members, and provide both a balance of stewardship and moderation. As one participant described:

...there was a board election in which the board changed significantly overnight... three new board members came in, and they coalesced with one of the previous board members who had been on the outs with the administration and the rest of the board – so the dynamics of the board shifted quickly... When I got hired, collectively the board had six years of experience. *Collectively*. Three of them had six months, and the other four had two years – a year-and-a-half. So, there was very little experience on the board. And, despite [the school district] having a great reputation and being progressive, this was kind of a shock to the system.

And so, it was very volatile, despite it being a very progressive district.

At a practical level, participants sometimes found themselves responsible for picking up the pieces of a fragmented board and appraising how changes to the composition of their school boards would affect organizational plans and operations. Following a deeply polarized election in one participants' school district, for example, the school board's composition shifted from a Republican to Democratic majority, quickly threatening a massive and hotly-politicized student reassignment plan that was well underway. He found himself in the awkward position of advancing a project largely opposed by the school board's new majority voting block.

Finally, several participants described challenges associated with a micromanagement orientation among their school boards – a preference to engage directly in school district administrative operations instead of attending to broader issues of policy, strategic planning, and finance:

I still believe that having a unified governance team that inspires confidence in all stakeholders is the most important thing a board can do, because if they work on that, they stay out of the practice. And they all want to be in the practice because that's what they know... or they *think* they know... There's no business in America that has two to three board meetings a month. You know, you have quarterly board meetings where you update the financials and all that, but... the micromanagement of a school board is, is really in many cases – it inhibits what could be high-functioning organizations. And so, it makes it challenging to sort of navigate that.

For those participants, working with a school board that engaged in micromanagement of the school district was a steady source of friction and frustration. One participant conceded her battle to lead all school board members toward a strategic disposition and worked instead simply to keep a voting majority on track:

Most school board members are not your well-educated individuals. They are your local blue-collar workers, who – many times, they don't understand the undertakings and the challenges in running a school system. And that's why they run amok – because in their mind, they were elected to tell the superintendent what to do and not join the superintendent in partnership in finding ways to make it right for children. They don't want to align – they want to dictate and tell you, “This is what you'd better do.” That kind of thing. So, you have to constantly work to keep a simple majority on the right side of the track, because if you get the majority on the wrong side of the track, your work is in vain. It's really a waste of your time.

The work of superintendents is uniquely intertwined with their employing school boards. For that reason, the challenges participants associated with school boards were acute and significant. Further, navigating those challenges was made more difficult by their complex interconnections. Participants found themselves juggling a set of challenges that were inextricably linked by the complex intersections of multiplicity, board-superintendent relationships, school board orientations, school board continuity, and the attendant conflicts that seem to typify school board governance. They found themselves in the tenuous position of both following the school board's direction and directing the school board, an awkward proposition even for the most seasoned superintendents.

**Challenges associated with the organization's leadership team.** Twelve participants identified challenges associated with the leadership team within their school organizations, even as they emphasized that group's role in their own success and the broader success of the school organization. At a most basic level, several participants entered the superintendency to find vacancies in critical positions within the leadership team. Consequently, they were compelled to act quickly, filling key leadership positions even as they were getting their own first glimpse at the structure, culture, and needs of their school districts. One participant entered the superintendency, for example, to find vacancies in the positions of assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction, assistant superintendent for operations, district transportation supervisor, and federal projects director, as well as vacancies for principals at 36% of the schools in his district. Others cited the difficulty of arriving in their school districts to discover as many as six vacant principalships. Additionally, some participants found themselves temporarily



assuming professional duties associated with vacant positions even as they began their own work as superintendents. One participant described that experience as “running crazy” in the face of intense pressure to ensure that his leadership team was intact and operational before teachers and students returned for a new school year.

Challenges associated with the leadership team ran deeper in other participants' narratives. Beyond filling vacancies, some participants were also challenged by the work of orchestrating, managing, and monitoring their respective leadership teams. One incoming superintendent, for example, found inequitable duty assignments and operational inefficiencies within his leadership team and spent the first six months of his superintendency working to resolve those problems:

...I spend a *lot* of my time talking to folks and trying to come up with – looking at the duties that were assigned to people, looking, trying to determine who had too much on their plate, who didn't have many duties, trying to shift responsibilities, picking up some gaps... We had nobody dealing with pupil services. That was like fragmented out to three or four people. But, you know, just trying to match responsibilities with jobs, with people...

For other participants – especially external entrants to the superintendency – the challenge of orchestrating the leadership team's work was less about functional duty assignments and more about the discomfort of relying on team members whose work habits and quality were simply unknown variables. One participant stated that he would never again enter a superintendency without bringing with him to the school district at least one familiar leadership team member:

I'll never go into a superintendency alone again... it's knowing that I have someone who I already know how they work, and I know if I say, "I need you to do this," I can spend my energy focused elsewhere – I don't have to monitor that person... It's really hard to monitor the work of everybody at once, and if I could just take a little of the burden off and have a couple of people I know can just go out and do... Probably the biggest challenge I'm facing right now is, I've got the four senior staff members whose contracts end this year. The don't know if they're going to be renewed or not, and they've been having a hard time incorporating – we've had a very hard time working as a team.

Another participant described lingering discomfort in finding little sense of teamwork or support for her efforts among some members of her own leadership team. In particular, she described a persistent tension with the district's finance officer despite efforts to unify her team:

I feel a shame on myself when... I'm going to need to go and tell the chief financial officer that we're going to make this major expenditure – a decision I've made, the board's interested in, it's good for kids – and I feel like I'm going to my mom or my daddy [to] ask them for an advance on my allowance... that's been surprising to me.

Cultivating teamwork and collaboration within the leadership team was a recurring challenge among participants. For one, cultivating collaboration among members of his team meant "getting them all to understand that they are ethical and moral leaders too, that they have that responsibility and to take it seriously." His challenge lay in reshaping the broader vision of his leadership team and helping members

to re-conceptualize their own work. Similarly, another participant struggled to engender a service orientation among members of the leadership team and wondered speculatively, “How do you support that, and how do you ensure that the cabinet understands that *all we're about* is support?!” For some, the answer remained elusive despite efforts to resolve the question and leverage their leadership teams to the organization's benefit.

**Political challenges.** Eleven participants described specific political challenges they experienced during the entry period. For several, political challenges were related to micropolitics within their school organizations: the subtle but potent use of power and influence by members of the organization to accomplish their own individual interests. Some even indicated that meeting those micropolitical challenges was the most difficult part of their work:

One of the biggest challenges in my career has been the politics of the position. There are certain decisions that you may think are “no-brainers” – that everybody in the world's going to understand it or the board's going to approve it unanimously... but there are no “no-brainers” in this position. I guess it has to do with the culture in different school districts, how decisions have been made in the past. I asked [the school] board... about the time I was hired, if they were any sacred cows in the district, and I was told there were none... and I found several along the way. We had one of the worst curriculum directors I've ever encountered in my life, and I found out that he had coached some of the board members. We had one of the laziest athletic directors I'd ever seen in my life, but he sang in the choir with one of the board members... So, I don't even ask if there

are any sacred cows any more, because there are and they're probably not going to tell you about them.

For him, the difficulty of dealing effectively with marginal employees was multiplied by the micropolitical challenge of overcoming opposition among influential members of the school organization to any adverse employment action he might initiate. For another participant, micropolitical challenges were more abstract. He described the need for a “handrail to hang onto” because micropolitical “currents will sweep you in different directions” as members of the school organization leverage power and influence to achieve their own goals, sometimes in opposition to the superintendent's. As one participant observed, negotiating competing micropolitical agendas can be both precarious and difficult:

You've got to balance that, because everyone has some type of agenda – good or bad. Most agendas are admirable, good agendas, but you have to respect every agenda as well. So you have to find the balancing act. And that is very tough for a superintendent.

For others, political challenges were associated with the difficulties of simultaneously attending to the disparate perspectives and expectations of multiple constituencies. They struggled to be simultaneously responsive to local stakeholders like parents and community members, to locally-elected officials like boards of county commissioners and boards of education, and to state and federal officials in various departments and branches of government. One participant described the difficulty of advancing an instructional initiative endorsed by the local school board and administrative team but rejected by parents in the school community. Another described

his responsibility to mediate the political adversity that existed between the school board and the board of county commissioners over issues of local school funding. Another still discussed the difficulty of developing the “political savvy” necessary to communicate effectively with state legislators, some of whom looked toward the school district with a “critical eye.” For each, the challenge of attending to the perspectives and interests of one group without simultaneously alienating another was notable.

A few participants also described macropolitical challenges associated with the broader “political unrest” surrounding contemporary public education. For them, that turbulence found different agencies and branches of government jockeying for control of public education by passing along regulations and mandates to control and direct the work of schools. One participant expressed a sense of powerlessness and frustration over those conditions, concluding that they just “do what they want to do,” leaving her to piece together the fragmented collection of requirements and mandates flowing into her school district. For her, the ongoing effort to bring sensibility and cohesion to the district's work represented the challenging byproduct of educational politics. Generally, participants expressed a greater sense of efficacy in responding to micropolitical challenges emerging within their school organizations than to macropolitical challenges more broadly originating at state and federal levels beyond their school organizations. While they felt some sense of efficacy as they responded to localized political challenges, they expressed a certain sense of frustrated powerlessness to influence and ameliorate state and federal political pressures broadly affecting the state of public education and the work of their own school organizations.

**Challenges associated with knowledge deficits.** Half the study's participants identified challenges associated with their own knowledge deficits as they entered the superintendency. Knowledge deficits conceptually represented three domains: the nature of the superintendent's work, the school organization, and the context of the community.

Especially for novice incoming superintendents, deficits in knowledge about the nature of their new work were challenging obstacles to overcome during their entry. From their perspectives, their fairly abstract understanding of the superintendent's work did not sufficiently prepare them for the realities of their responsibilities once they held the position:

You don't know 'til you do it. And that was my same experience as an assistant principal – I thought I knew what a principal did, but I really didn't know until I got into the office. Like I said, sitting directly across the hallway, I thought I knew what the superintendent did, but I really didn't know. So I'm not sure... whatever preparation people go through... you can really say that you really know what the job entails until you start doing it...

One participant speculated that he could have better understood and anticipated the nature of his work as a superintendent had he previously served as an assistant superintendent:

Theoretically, it would've been great to have been an assistant superintendent for several years coming into here. I would've definitely had a better idea about what's fixing to slap me upside the head, so to speak. It would've been better for me personally to have had several years in that position... [I] would've known the issues of budgets, of certain federal programs coming in with money and leaving with money... That position gives you awhile to get adjusted to some things and

see some things and would have allowed me, if I would've been in that position, to branch out and say, "OK, show me about this..."

Though he had served as a principal and experienced the pressures and challenges of leadership associated with the senior administrative position within an individual school, he explained that challenges associated with the superintendency are unique. For him, previous experience as an assistant superintendent would have informed his perspective on those unique positional challenges in ways that service as a principal simply could not. Another participant, however, offered only a mixed appraisal of the extent to which his previous work as an assistant superintendent led to an informed perspective about the work that awaited him as a superintendent. He described seeing only pieces and parts of a larger, more complex puzzle as an assistant superintendent and getting his first glimpse at its entirety only after becoming a superintendent. He knew, for example, how his own department's budget operated, but lacked a broader perspective about the entirety of the district's budget operations until stepping into the superintendency, at which time he embarked on a "huge learning curve" aimed at filling gaps in his knowledge of that process as a whole.

Still another participant lamented the lack of formal preparation that might have better armed him with an understanding of his work as a superintendent. In doing so, he expressed some frustrated irony about that lack of preparation:

It's always interesting to me the amount of time we spend in preparing teachers, but we don't really have any kind of programs [for superintendents]. Our colleges and universities, even our state departments don't have programs to prepare... or support [them]. We don't have any formal programs to do that... People fuss about

leadership, and yet, most folks have to learn it through experience – either good experiences or bad experiences... It just seems kind of ironic that people want to be critical of school leaders, but there's not a lot of opportunities for them to be prepared to do [that work].

Deficits in knowledge about the school organization were especially prominent among external entrants to the superintendency. While a certain lack of knowledge about the internal workings of a new school organization is reasonably predictable for external entrants, their narratives revealed a more surprising truth. For several, there were barriers to knowledge acquisition beyond their lack of previous professional experience in their new school districts. One participant, for example, specifically tried to learn about the school district from the school board during the selection process, only to find upon entry that the school board itself lacked an informed perspective to share:

...They didn't think there was much else that needed to be fixed here... which proved not to be the case. But, they were not trying to mislead me at all. It was just that they were not aware of everything that needed to be done... and I'll just leave it at that.

Other participants had similar experiences. In trying to learn as much as they could about their new school districts before beginning their work there, some met with only marginal success. One incoming superintendent recalled, “They were in good shape financially. They were stable. There were a lot of things underneath, though... things everybody knew but nobody talked about.” He ultimately concluded that stepping into the superintendency would always be accompanied by a certain lack of knowledge about the school district, adding, “Do as much research as you can, knowing that you'll never know



the real facts 'til you get there.” For some, though, even attempting that research was difficult. As one participant described:

I didn't get to meet anyone else until I was officially hired because [the school board] wanted to keep kind of an in-house process. They actually named three people as finalists, which is required by [state] law. But, during that period of time, I couldn't come in and interview anybody. I couldn't call school employees. They wanted to wait until they officially announced the final person. So, they decided I was the finalist, or the last person, and asked me if I would accept, and I said yes. And *then* I got to talk to some people here.

Due to experiences like these, several participants began their work with greater knowledge deficits about their new school organizations than can be attributed to their external entry alone.

Finally, lack of knowledge about the broader community emerged as a challenge among incoming superintendents. For them, the need to develop an informed perspective about the community extended beyond a simple first impression and reflected the nuanced context within which their work as superintendents would ultimately unfold:

For me, [the challenge] was understanding the demographics, understanding what kind of people and kids I'm coming to, understanding the basics for the county, and where they were academically and athletically and socially, and getting on the website, talking to the former superintendent, and talking to the mayor and the minister of the church... It was just assimilating into the school district so I could... try to move in and keep things going on the straight and narrow, or make them better immediately.

As one participant observed, “coming in and just trying to get your arms around what actually exists here” can be a difficult undertaking, but one that is essential to “setting a path that the board and other stakeholders can buy into.”

**Challenges associated with organizational change.** Nine participants experienced challenges associated with leading organizational change during their entry into the superintendency. Each described substantial organizational resistance to change and the difficulty of overcoming that resistance as they worked to lead their districts through important change efforts. For one participant in a persistently low-performing school district, “how hard change is for people” was the biggest challenge and greatest surprise she experienced during the entry period. She added, “Everyone in the district verbalized that we need *change*. Now, it's one thing to say, 'We need change, we need change'... but change is *hard* for people.” For another, resistance to change came in successive waves – first from the school board, then from school district employees, and then from the broader community outside the school organization. With each incremental measure of progress, she encountered a new wave of resistance from another corner of the school system.

Resistance to change, however, was not limited to low-performing school districts. One external entrant to a high-performing school district likewise found substantial resistance to organizational change upon his arrival:

Good is the enemy of great. And sometimes it's harder to reform or transform a system that's had some success... because, why do we need to do that? We're already doing pretty good. This district has the highest SAT scores, has the most National Merit Scholars of any district in [the state]... So, pushing new ideas –

that's been a challenge... They're not very innovative. They're kind of hesitant to try new things... We don't have a talent problem – we got tremendous talent. We don't have a whole bunch of sorry teachers here. But trying to get them to try new ideas – that's been really difficult, to be honest with you.

Even internal entrants to the superintendency who had, through their previous experience there, garnered support and confidence among their colleagues met with resistance to organizational changes they tried to initiate as superintendents. One described an expansive technology initiative that he initiated within the school district soon after becoming superintendent. He invested substantial federal grant funds into the deployment of wireless network infrastructures in every school, equipped each classroom with the latest presentation technologies, placed laptop computers in the hands of teachers and students, and embraced a “bring your own technology” initiative that would allow students to use their own personal electronic devices for their use during instructional activities. The initiative was celebrated throughout the district. Still, however, he met with resistance among veteran teachers when they were challenged to change their instructional practices in order to leverage the widespread deployment of information technologies. Despite providing teachers with professional training, summer stipends to attend work-alike planning sessions, and release time during the school day to participate in teacher-led workshops, he was discouraged upon visiting classrooms to find many veteran teachers reluctant even to touch the new equipment. Instead, they clung to their textbooks despite students' eagerness to embrace the new resources that sat idly by. While his experience suggests the frustration incoming superintendents may experience as they attempt organizational change, his surprise also suggests a problematic limitation

in his fundamental understanding of the change process that likely compounded the difficulties he experienced.

One participant captured the underlying complexity of the challenge as he described problems of organizational change he encountered soon after his appointment to the superintendency:

When you try to change organizations, you're really talking about changing *people*. An organization is not a thing. An organization is created or made up of people. So you're trying to move people, change people, encourage people, get them to where you want them to be... and that's a challenge. In some instances, you're talking about people's values and people's beliefs. And so, what you think is best sometimes doesn't always agree or coincide with others who have been here for awhile. So, how do you *reconcile* that?

Their efforts to overcome resistance to organizational change placed some participants on a precarious tightrope on which they were forced to balance the sometimes urgent need for change against the slow pace with which organizations adopt change. As one participant concluded:

For some folks, it made them feel as though, “Oh well, is he coming in being the great savior, as if nothing's been done here that was done right?” How do you then begin to balance that conversation, by saying, you know, “Some great things have been done. We've made significant accomplishments in certain areas. However...” And then you go on about that... and you have to realize that there are some things that just *are not* going to happen overnight.

**Challenges associated with the media.** Eight participants described challenges associated with the media. They expressed concerns about the media's negative treatment of school district activities and the difficulties of conducting their work against the backdrop of a sometimes adversarial relationship with local media outlets. One participant's frustration and distrust of the media ran deep:

...There's two people in this world that are paid to lie and exaggerate, and that's lawyers and reporters. And, you know, I can't afford to lie or exaggerate.

However, what I say can be turned around or taken out of context depending on how that reporter or how that attorney wants to use it so that they get their paycheck.

An adversarial relationship with the media can be detrimental not only to the school district, but also to the superintendent who leads it. As one participant recounted:

...the neighborhood newspaper has been a big problem. And they take pride in making the district look bad. They take pride that, two superintendents ago, they had a laptop initiative, and the newspaper came out against it, against the superintendent, and it cost him his job. And they brought him down... And it's the publisher – he just latches on and does very negative and very public personal attacks...

For several participants, challenges associated with the media's negative treatment extended beyond their own personal discomfort. In those cases, that negative treatment actually undermined specific district initiatives or, even worse, crippled the district's will and capacity to move forward with projects that might draw criticism from the media:

That was sad for such a progressive district – that some of those decisions were based upon how bad the media reports were going to be. I mean, they quit going with specific things that impact academics... they quit going to conferences, they quit bringing in national, prominent speakers because they were afraid what the media was going to say, how much money they spent on them. And that's a direct impact on learning when you don't have access to the emerging trends that are going on in the country. The specter just resonates, it's just lingering. It's the big elephant in the room that nobody wants to deal with. I've been surprised at how much they let the media control them.

Several participants described how specific school district initiatives became fodder for criticism for the local media. One incoming superintendent led an effort to launch a new high school that would expand academic and extracurricular opportunities for students and relieve overcrowding in existing schools only to find that the effort was rebuked and criticized by the local newspaper. Another negotiated a complex lawsuit related to school finance against a wellspring of criticism in both local and statewide media publications. Another worked to advance the board's efforts to transition the district toward community schools in the face of harsh criticism in local, state, and national print and electronic media outlets.

For these participants, conducting their work against the contentious backdrop of media criticism was simply an unavoidable reality. As one remarked, “Hey, it's the cost of doing business.” One participant ended an anecdote about challenges associated with the media by offering some cautionary advice that underscored the inevitability of media scrutiny and the constant potential for criticism:

You need to be ready to answer the question – and I'm talking about from the media. You need to be ready to answer the question, because *the question is going to come to you*. And I don't know what the question is. I'm just saying, [regardless of] the question, you need to be ready to answer it.

**Challenges associated with role relationships.** For eight participants, acclimating to their role as superintendents and negotiating role relationships with others were challenges during the entry period. One participant explained the difficulty of adjusting to the positional power, unique responsibility, and authority associated with the superintendent's role:

I was assistant superintendent. I was doing all these things and in my mind I felt like I was running it, and in some ways I was pulling the strings... maybe behind the scenes. But it's a totally different thing to be the “buck stops here” person. When we had to say we were laying off teachers or teacher assistants before, I was a part of the process. I was helping develop it. I was writing some of the releases. But I didn't have to own it in the public. And so the difference is, you have to own it in the public. You have to be ready for that. The best thing I can say is you better decide... You are like the dog chasing the car. You become superintendent, you're the dog that just caught the car, and you better know what you want to do with it because you don't get a whole lot of time to think any more and to reflect...

At the same time, adjusting to changes in how others perceived them as a result of their new role was a strange and occasionally disorienting experience for some participants.

One internal entrant to the superintendency recalled when she first realized that others viewed her differently as a result of her new role in the school organization:

I'm really shocked about the way people view me... the way it all of a sudden changed... I mean a few years ago I was wearing the khaki pants, the sweater, and the good teacher shoes. Not walking around in heels all day. And I have blue ink now. I'm that same person. But what surprised me is the way that I'm viewed differently because of this position, so that's probably been the only thing, just the challenge of it, the difficulty of it...

Negotiating that role adjustment required some internal entrants to the superintendency to re-conceptualize preexisting relationships with colleagues and to interact with them differently. As one participant explained, "Being peers in June, and all of the sudden, July 1, now I'm your boss – that's been difficult to deal with. It's been uncomfortable." Another participant struggled to reconcile decisions he made in his new role with personal relationships he had previously formed with colleagues:

If you've been somewhere for awhile, you have established relationships... you have to divorce yourself from relationships with people, and that's tough. That's easier said than done. But if you are genuinely doing what is best for the children you serve, you divorce yourself from that and you look for what is the best thing you can do. You know, I saw people leave jobs who were personal friends of mine, and ultimately I was the one who recommended that we cut the position.

External entrants to the superintendency also reported difficulties adapting to the unique nature of the superintendent's role in the school organization. One participant



described disparities between his own conception of the superintendent's role the expectations held by others in his new school district:

There may have been a few things that I would have probably done a little bit differently... like our principal meetings. People here were used to the superintendent leading the meeting. Well, yes, these are principal meetings. I'm there, and I would get up, say a few comments... but I have a staff, so I'm going to let my staff lead and guide and do the things. Over time, it got back to me where people would say, "They don't see you as leading the meeting or this being your meeting." I'm thinking, "Oh my God, I gotta stand up and lead the – C'mon people!" But then I had to take a step back... and look at it through their lens. But I'm also looking at it through [my lens] – and I mean, I'm the freaking superintendent. I don't need to stand up and try to convince anybody or prove anything to anybody – I'm the superintendent. You give other people opportunities to grow. You give other people other opportunities to lead. And I firmly believe in that. So, that's what I was trying to do.

In his conception, the superintendent's role included fostering others' leadership by stepping back and encouraging them to assume leadership duties. However, his actions violated his colleagues' role expectation that the superintendent personally direct administrative meetings as a function his positional leadership. Their differing conceptions of the role and its responsibilities led them toward contradictory conclusions about his engagement and efficacy as a leader, which became a problematic impasse that he worked to reconcile both philosophically and practically throughout his entry into the superintendency.

These participants' experiences suggest the complexity and difficulty of adjusting to their new organizational role and negotiating relationships with others in the organization. Simultaneously, their efforts intersected issues of positional power and authority, symbolism, and conflicting expectations and assumptions. Recognizing, understanding, and navigating those interconnected issues were important challenges for these incoming superintendents as they learned about and adjusted to their new organizational roles.

**Challenges associated with the superintendent's predecessor.** While some participants discussed ways in which their predecessors positively influenced their entry into the superintendency, seven attributed challenges to their predecessors. Most commonly, they cited difficulties associated with their predecessors' legacies. They inherited from their predecessors traditions of undesirable organizational behavior they found difficult to overcome. In some cases, they were the unfortunate beneficiaries of damage caused by their predecessors' actions. One participant succeeded a predecessor whose temporary appointment to the superintendency ultimately lasted six years and whose casual employment arrangement with the school board ultimately led to organizational stagnation:

...the superintendent who was here had been here for six years, but he had never moved to this county... He was a retired superintendent who had come here as an interim for one year. [The school board] liked him, and they said, "Hey, would you do it for a year?" He lives... about forty-five minutes away from here. And, they said, "Live at home, come in late, leave early, take time off, but will you get us through a transition year?" So, he did. Well, that one year turned into six

years... There were some underlying issues, and I think one of the issues had just become that no change was occurring. It was... the same old same old... they had a superintendent who had been there for six years and never lived in the county, who truly worked about three days a week, and sort of the same old networks were in place... and they wanted change.

Eager to embrace the kind of change the board sought, the incoming superintendent learned quickly that inaction had become institutionalized by years of stasis, and that her efforts to begin moving the school organization forward again led to resistance among both district employees and the broader community. Likewise, another participant attributed institutionalized inaction to the two interim superintendents who immediately preceded him and who decided, in his estimation, that they were not “going to ruffle any feathers [or] make any tough decisions.” He entered the superintendency to uncover myriad neglected problems with the school district's budget, with school personnel, and with curricular and instructional programs that were “just stacked up here, waiting to be done.” He also arrived to find a school board impatient for change. When he began to make the “tough decisions” that had been neglected by his predecessors, he faced controversy and resistance among school stakeholders. He ultimately weathered that backlash and matter-of-factly summarized, “...It should have been done a year or two ago, but nobody – you know, the last superintendent should have done this. He didn't go it. But, we need to do it now.”

For other participants, challenges associated with overcoming the legacies of their predecessors were less about their predecessors' inaction than about their different leadership styles. One, for example, followed a predecessor who held a diametrically

opposed vision for organizational hierarchy and communication than his own. Inheriting the communication patterns institutionalized by his predecessor, he found himself at odds with principals, disconnected from his assistant superintendents, and isolated from teachers. Resolving those emergent problems required him to reverse the entrenched communication patterns of his predecessor. Much of his early work was concerned with initiating new structures for communication and influencing the organization's underlying professional culture. His experiences were not uncommon among participants. An incoming superintendent in another district experienced many of the same difficulties as he struggled to express his own leadership style against the backdrop of his predecessor's legacy:

The challenge for me is... I'm following a person who, philosophically, is on a whole different page from me. I'm following someone who is considered a strong superintendent, who had very strong opinions, and had a very specific philosophy about education. ...Coming in with an entirely different philosophy has been a challenge... I'm trying to restore some authority up and down the chain of command in the school district, to provide some authority and judgment back to principals, to provide some authority and judgment back to senior staff, to ultimately empower teachers... And, it's hard... following a superintendent who sat for a long time, who hired all but one of the sitting principals... I'm coming into a district where folks have operated one way for a long time... I'm trying to show them a different approach... and that's created some conflicts.

For each of these participants, challenges associated with their predecessors were largely the residual byproducts of events that occurred in their school organizations prior

to their own entry. One participant, however, had a notably different experience. She entered the superintendency to find a reasonably stable, healthy organizational environment and did not struggle with the lingering residue of her predecessor's legacy. As she moved forward with her first significant leadership activity, though, her predecessor reinserted himself into her unfolding work. As she led the school district toward a significant reorganization of its schools, she met with predictable criticisms from some constituencies within her community. She was shocked, though, when the former superintendent injected himself into the conversation and very publicly criticized her leadership and her first significant initiative as superintendent:

...Unfortunately the ex-superintendent got involved, and that was the biggest surprise that I've ever had. And he knew it was coming... I mean, the board had already told him it was coming. He knew it, but he got involved, and that was the biggest, I guess, surprise and disappointment. He even got on the radio [to criticize me]...

Her predecessor's public rebuke not only challenged her confidence and credibility, but also fueled resistance to her work. She struggled to overcome those setbacks in the months following his criticism of her leadership efforts.

Superintendents exert substantial influence over organizational culture, perception, and progress. As these seven participants experienced first-hand, their predecessors' influence did not fade rapidly upon their departure. Even as these participants worked early in their tenures to establish their own influence and express their own leadership, they struggled to overcome the lasting influence of their predecessors and, in some cases, the unfortunate byproducts of their actions.

**Situational challenges.** Seven participants described situational challenges that emerged during the entry period. Highly contextualized, situational challenges accrue from unusual or unique features of the school organization, the dynamics surrounding it, or the broader community in which it functions. One participant's experiences illustrate the circumstantial nature of situational challenges facing some incoming superintendents:

[The school district] had just built these two brand-new K-12 facilities, and the facilities were not constructed well. There are a number of problems. Also, the facilities were not secured. There were no security systems placed in any of the facilities, so there was a high level of theft with computers and televisions. They had ordered a truckload of televisions and they just disappeared, because when the orders came, there was [sic] no checks and balances as to who was responsible for receiving them. Just a myriad of issues that a new superintendent typically wouldn't face...

Specifically arriving to find ill-constructed new school facilities and rampant theft of equipment was itself a genuinely unique experience, but contending with situational challenges was not uncommon among participants. Another, for example, arrived to find that his school district's proximity to the border of another state and ill-defined and unmonitored student registration procedures had led the illegal enrollment of many students in his district's schools so that they could participate in their interscholastic athletic programs. Another still identified situational challenges associated with his school district's close proximity to a military base:

We are gaining, on average, 500 students a year... There's no help from the federal government... We have a tremendous number of students who live on military

property in our school district; however, we get no tax revenue because it's federal property... We're getting absolutely no revenue with the exception of federal impact aid, which is approximately \$120 a student.

While the challenge he described may, at one level, reflect the fairly common challenge associated with issues of school finance, the uncommon situational context of his school district's proximity to a military base shaped his own leadership experiences in unique circumstantial ways that differentiated them from those of other participants. Similarly, another participant's financial challenges quickly evolved into a unique situational challenge when she found herself thrust into a high-profile lawsuit with a prominent charter school within her local community. Serving over 9% of school-aged children there, the charter school demanded nearly \$1 million in additional funding from her school district, which became a hotly contested issue before her appointment to the superintendency. Unable to settle the dispute amicably, tensions escalated between the charter and public schools, and she “became superintendent with that lawsuit kind of looming ahead, knowing in January that we had an anticipated court date [in] June.” For her, the fairly common challenge of school finance evolved into the genuinely unique challenge of unsuccessfully fighting a highly visible lawsuit through the state's court of appeals.

One incoming superintendent leading the city school district in a multi-district community described the situational challenge of absorbing students when the county school district closed one of its schools and stopped serving students enrolled there:

We have traditionally had outstanding test scores... We have a city and county school system here, and there was an elementary school that was low-performing.

Actually, it was in the city limits, but it was a county school, and the county announced in March that they were going to close that school, which meant that the city school system had to absorb that low-performing school. We gained about 100 students from that school... It was low-socioeconomic, low-performing... That had an effect on our student population and ultimately brought our test scores down [resulting in] just another challenge...

The county school district's decision to close one of its schools forced her to ensure that her school district could meet the learning needs of a new and substantially different subgroup of the student population and led her to initiate substantial changes to instructional design and delivery in her school district. Each of these participants' stories illustrates the particular difficulty of mediating situational challenges. They were hard to anticipate, and their highly individualized nature made it difficult to draw from precedent or best practice as participants sought to overcome them. In the end, participants were often left to generate responses that were as highly individualized as the challenges themselves.

**Challenges associated with student achievement.** Seven participants cited challenges associated with student achievement in conjunction with their roles as instructional leaders. For some, that challenge lay in improving widespread patterns of low student achievement throughout their school districts. One participant, for example, struggled with the “huge, mammoth task” of reversing low student achievement patterns in an organization where student outcomes had not been a priority in a very long time. Another found that the challenge of improving student achievement did not disappear, but shifted, once he achieved some success in raising the school district's modest



achievement rates. After overcoming that initial challenge, he found yet a new one facing him: “sustaining or even further enhancing” newfound improvement in student achievement. For other participants, challenges associated with student achievement were isolated within specific demographic subgroups of the student population:

Achievement in our school district has been an issue. We have a very diverse population – a great number of children with exceptionalities, children with disabilities, rather. We have a large number of students who are classified as LEP. We have a great number of students who live [in poverty] or are classified as lower [socioeconomic status]. So, many challenges there. And then, a lot of racial diversity as well. And, movement of students – we have a very transient nature of students...

For them, improving student achievement was complicated by the challenge of responding creatively and effectively to the varied performance patterns and unique learning needs of students with different economic, cultural, or ethnic backgrounds. Improving low achievement among diverse groups of learners challenged them to lead their school organizations toward innovative strategies tailored to the specific instructional needs of students with different backgrounds and specific learning deficits.

For some participants, low student achievement rates had become a dire condition requiring immediate intervention, and that challenge weighed on them even before their first day in the superintendency. One incoming superintendent, for example, attended a court hearing held to examine the circumstances of the state's lowest performing schools, several of which were located in his new school district, before he even arrived in the district to begin his work there. An immediate priority for another participant was

reversing the school district's collision course with sanctions imposed under the federal *No Child Left Behind Act*. Nearly half the schools in his district were failing to meet required Adequate Yearly Progress targets and faced significant penalties for poor student performance, a central concern as he entered the superintendency.

For each of these participants, responsibility for improving student achievement was direct and personal. They believed that, as the chief instructional leaders of their school organizations, they bore a direct responsibility to create the organizational conditions and processes necessary to reverse patterns of poor student performance, eliminate achievement gaps among diverse groups of students, and help their schools avoid penalties associated with low performance under state and federal accountability programs. Since teaching and learning are central to the work of school organizations, and given the problematic conditions they found upon their arrival, the scale of that responsibility and pressure to meet those challenges were substantial.

**Challenges associated with a sense of isolation.** Six participants described difficulties associated with a sense of isolation in the superintendency. For them, the unique nature of the superintendent's role alienated them from a professional peer group with whom they might otherwise have enjoyed a more familiar and reciprocal relationship. As one participant described:

It's a very lonely job... because the only people you really can talk to are your fellow superintendents – there aren't that many of us – and you've got to even be careful with that, you know? And so, you tend to have one or two people you can share anything with, and they're just as busy as you are and got their own issues, so on a day-to-day basis, it's just a very lonely job.

Similarly, another participant observed that the superintendent's unique role meant that, while others with whom he worked often came to him for answers and support, he had no equivalent positional counterpart to approach for the same support, leaving him with a sense of alienation and dislocation from his colleagues. For him, that feeling of isolation was magnified because he was a novice superintendent. He expressed measured hope that his sense of isolation would fade as he acclimated to the role and developed relationships with superintendents in other school districts over time. However, he lamented the lack of those relationships that could have benefited him as he negotiated the demands of the superintendency for the first time.

In addition to the lack of positional peers in their school organizations, participants also described a sense of deliberate, guarded detachment from their colleagues that accompanied their entry into the superintendency. They not only lacked peers to whom they could turn for support, but they also struggled to keep their distance from others throughout the organization:

One of the things that I always worry about [is] how much... do I talk to people, within this school system or within this office, because, I always worry about what will they go say, how much – that's one of the concerns that I have.

Several other participants echoed that sentiment. One, for example, described her efforts to guard against developing social relationships with colleagues that might compromise the professional distance she believed must characterize the superintendency:

I'm not going to go play badminton. I'm not going to go do a lot of dinner stuff. You know, my family – my brothers, my sisters, a few outside friends – are really my outside friends. And I'm not going to be chum buddy. I'll be friendly and

have a good relationship with everybody that I can, but I'm not going to [socialize]... I don't form those kind of professional relationships. I don't mix the personal and professional that much.

Another participant's sense of isolation was multiplied by his relocation from another state to accept his first superintendency. Having spent his entire professional career working in a single school district within another state, he had developed an experiential attachment to that organization and an understanding of its context that was developed over time. When he moved into a new role in a new organization in a new state, he felt not only isolated by the nature of the role itself, but also isolated – at least temporarily – from an organization with which he enjoyed no benefit of history or experiential attachment. He was an outsider, and he was alone.

Another participant observed how her transition into the superintendency changed the nature of her relationships with long-time friends and family members and, predictably, exacerbated her sense of isolation:

There was this little Christmas party last year, and a lot folks there are people who used to teach [with me] – a group of us who ran together that are all teachers. I realized now that I changed their fun. Me coming to their Christmas gathering will change what they feel comfortable saying... So for that reason, there is an isolation... That's really a challenge... In a normal job, you might turn to your sister and share a concern of something you're struggling with at work. I can't share that with my two sisters because that would be inappropriate, professionally. My friends who used to be my good friends – a lot of them are still teachers, and that's very difficult because it has moved our friendships to a different level. I

would say I probably feel closest to the one remaining friend out of that group who now works in [another state]. But that's probably the person I'm gravitating more to now because it doesn't have any impact on her what I do here professionally. But that's a challenge.

For these participants, isolation was a specific problem that operated on multiple levels. At once, it deprived them of immediate professional support and reciprocity, led them to install boundaries of distance from those with whom they had previously enjoyed close working relationships, and left them to face the complex difficulties of their work alone at the time when they could have benefited most from attachment to their colleagues and friends. Simultaneously for a few participants, the specific problem of professional role isolation extended into their personal lives and came to represent challenges at emotional and social-interactive levels as well. For them, the isolation that characterized their professional roles came to likewise characterize their personal lives. In that sense, important intersections exist between challenges associated with a sense of isolation and the personal costs participants associated with the superintendency.

**Challenges associated with organizational deficits.** Six participants assumed the superintendency to discover organizational deficits that created difficulties in their work. Those organizational deficits were evenly distributed among process deficits, human capital deficits, and low morale among employees of their school districts.

Process deficits compounded the difficulties of one participant's work. She arrived in her new school district to discover that it lacked clearly-defined procedures for accomplishing even the most routine organizational tasks. For her, the accompanying challenges were about not only remediating those organizational deficits, but also about

how those remedial efforts distracted her from the work she truly wanted to perform as a school leader:

When I got here, I discovered that there really were no processes in place for things. Clearly, you cannot operate without a set of clear processes, and I think that's why they were... beginning to have some problems. But as a superintendent, I don't want to spend all my time on that. I want to do big picture items, and so I really kind of had to take myself back to being a [process manager]. And what I realized is, you have to do both, and that's challenging. You have to keep working on your big picture vision. At the same time, you have to have the bricks that hold that vision up... It's great to have a vision, but if you can't execute the vision, it was just a great idea that never happened. So, I kept turning to that thought that I've got to keep my vision, I've got to do it, but I have to be able to execute it, and I can't keep having these little issues taking me away from it. I just got to take the time and write some policies and put some processes in place and go through all the getting it approved... got to do 'em both. And so, that slows down your vision...

Another participant experienced the same frustrations in her own school district. She arrived there eager to lead the school board's charge to improve student achievement only to find that the school district lacked any internal processes to evaluate teacher effectiveness. When she attempted to analyze teacher effectiveness data and formulate plans to improving teaching and learning across the organization, she was stalled almost immediately because the district lacked the organizational capacity to deliver the very information necessary to improve its effectiveness. "Something had to give... [in] this

chaotic boil,” she concluded. Her only option was to make the best educated guesses possible about curriculum delivery and instructional effectiveness, while her primary attention was redirected from improving student learning to remediating process deficiencies.

Other participants described lack of human capital as an organizational deficit. For one, lack of human capital was immediately evident in the district's leadership team. For years, the school district had grown in student enrollment at the highest per capita rate in the state. Over a thirteen-year period, student enrollment grew from approximately 4,000 to over 10,000. During the same time period, however, the size of the district leadership team remained unchanged, spreading that group increasingly thin and leading to inadequate supervision of programs ranging from curriculum and instruction to building maintenance to student support services. He entered the superintendency to find a talented and eager administrative team that was simply spread too thin to function effectively, hindering his ability to implement the improvement strategies he envisioned and stalling the pace at which he wanted to move the district forward.

Some participants also arrived to find low morale running deep throughout their school organizations. One participant who sought upon his arrival to hold individual meetings with his cabinet to introduce himself and learn about their work and ambitions for the school organization found them unwilling to do so. They were so frustrated and demoralized by the conditions of their work that they were willing to meet with him only as a group so that they could communicate their dissatisfaction through a single, uniform voice. He found their unanimity as a team admirable, but was troubled by the message

they delivered and by the impact of low morale on their capacity to go forward. As another participant observed, difficult working conditions can easily depress morale, even in school districts that have much to celebrate:

One of the things I was surprised about is how downtrodden the staff was, how beaten down they felt. As good as [this] county is, they've lost the pep in their step and pride in their stride because the media's so negative on them, and the budgets have been so bad. As an educator, you have to be optimistic. You have to be positive. And 'woe is me' is kind of... a little surprising for a big, suburban, progressive district like this. That's been a surprise.

That surprise challenged him to think differently about his work, especially in the early months of his superintendency. Finding a deflated, downtrodden staff upon his arrival, he was forced to turn his attention away from the improvements he originally envisioned and toward re-energizing his colleagues to embrace new possibilities with confidence and optimism.

**Challenges associated with personnel administration.** Six participants described challenges associated with personnel administration. Those challenges revolved around specific instances of employee misconduct and the broader legal framework governing employment in the public school setting. One participant described a particularly striking case of employee misconduct that emerged early in her transition into the superintendency:

Last spring, I got a call from the sheriff. He said, "We've had a report that some of your people are stealing... equipment and things from the board." ...After days and days of investigation, I had to terminate three people in maintenance who'd



been, for ten years, buying equipment and everything else under the sun [with school district funds] and taking it home with them... We recovered probably \$85,000 worth of equipment on those three people at their homes... That took a lot of time away from what I needed to be doing.

Other participants described suspending and ultimately dismissing teachers for inappropriate conduct with children, as well as terminating the employment of bus drivers and other classified employees as a result of inadequate performance and other problem behaviors. Still another participant described having to dismiss his chief communications officer and his own executive secretary for inappropriately sharing confidential and sensitive information to which they had access as a result of their professional roles in the school organization. In each case, participants faced not only the challenge of dealing effectively with those employees, but also the difficulty of controlling damage caused by the activities that led their dismissals.

Beyond facing challenges associated with employees' misconduct or inadequate performance, participants also experienced challenges more broadly associated with the complex set of laws, procedures, and regulations governing school personnel administration. For some, acclimating to that regulatory landscape was a challenge unto itself:

„„you're really fixing to make a career change [when you become a superintendent]. I mean, you go from supervising students to supervising adults – it's a career change, because you've got all the employment issues that you didn't have to think about as a classroom teacher... [and] a lot of decisions that are going to be made have legal ramifications to them.

One participant's struggle to learn about and attend to the legal, procedural dimension of personnel administration was compounded by her district's previous inattention to them. As she began to review personnel records and evaluate the school district's personnel administration program, she found that administrators had not completed employee evaluations, required by law and local policy, for 90% of the district's teaching staff in several years. For her, the challenge was about ensuring that both her own work and the work of her administrative staff complied with required regulations. Another participant learned a difficult lesson about the importance of attending to employment procedures and regulations when she took a “shaky” contract non-renewal recommendation to the school board for approval. Underestimating the documentary requirements of the contract non-renewal process and trusting too implicitly that the principal had met them, she moved forward with the non-renewal recommendation only to find that she lacked the evidence necessary to support the recommendation under current statutory and case law. “The board backed me on it,” she said with measured relief, but she learned an important lesson about documentary requirements that changed both her own estimation of the process and her disposition toward working with principals on matters of personnel administration in the future:

I won't do that again. I'll ask to see [the documentation], and it won't mean that I don't trust you. It's just going to mean that, just the same way that I expect you to do your job documenting, that I need to do my job of saying before I make that decision and tell that teacher I'm not going to recommend you for another contract, that I have done my due diligence as well... That was my shortcoming as

much as it was the principal's shortcoming. I'm at fault there, too, and so that's one of the things that I will not do again.

Whether their particular difficulties were specifically tied to the conduct of their employees or more broadly associated with the legal framework governing public school employment, these six participants found themselves challenged to respond to the unique, important supervisory demands of the superintendency.

### **Research Question 3: Variation Among Participants**

Beyond describing the nature of challenges incoming superintendents associated with their entry into the role, this study further sought to ascertain whether or not there were variations in those challenges based upon participants' personal characteristics or features of their organizations. To explore this question, the prevalence of those challenges was categorically disaggregated around five participant variables, including gender, race/ethnicity, age band, locale, and point of entry into the superintendency. Tables 3-7 present the results of that analysis. This section highlights noteworthy variations in those data. Three important considerations qualify those highlights. First, the percentage rates reported in Tables 3-7 tend to obscure very small participant counts in a few demographic categories and may on their surface overemphasize related variations. Second, the statistics presented in Tables 3-7 are purely descriptive; accompanying discussions are likewise intended to describe noteworthy variations but not to imply statistically significant variations. Third, neither Tables 3-7 nor their related discussions are intended to assert causal relationships between participant demographics and the challenges they experienced.

**Variation by gender.** As illustrated by Table 3, noteworthy variations existed between male and female participants in seven experiential categories. Male participants identified personal costs associated with the superintendency, challenges associated with role relationships, and challenges associated with student achievement twice as frequently as their female counterparts. At the same time, female participants identified challenges associated with the media and situational challenges twice as frequently as their male counterparts. Even more notably, female participants identified challenges associated with a sense of isolation and challenges association with personnel administration three times more often than male participants. Male participants cited personal costs associated with the superintendency most often, while female participants cited challenges associated with issues of school finance most often. Conversely, male participants cited challenges associated with a sense of isolation and challenges associated with personnel administration least often, while female participants cited challenges associated with role relationships and challenges associated with student achievement least often.

Table 3

*Percentage of Study Participants Experiencing Challenges by Gender*

Experiential Category	Male ( <i>n</i> = 15)	Female ( <i>n</i> = 5)
School finance	67	80
Demands on the superintendent's time	73	60
Personal costs associated with the superintendency	80	40
Local community	67	60
School boards	67	60
Organization's leadership team	67	40
Political challenges	60	40
Knowledge deficits	53	40
Organizational change	40	60
Media	33	60
Role relationships	47	20
Superintendent's predecessor	33	40
Situational challenges	27	60
Student achievement	40	20
Sense of isolation	20	60
Organizational deficits	27	40
Personnel administration	20	60

**Variation by race/ethnicity.** For the purpose of this study, race and ethnicity were collapsed into the bimodal categories of white and non-white. As illustrated by Table 4, noteworthy variations existed between white and non-white participants in five experiential categories. White participants identified challenges associated with knowledge deficits twice as frequently as their non-white counterparts and identified challenges associated with the local community three times more frequently. At the same

time, non-white participants identified challenges associated with organizational change and challenges associated with organizational deficits twice as frequently as their white counterparts and identified challenges associated with student achievement three times more frequently. White participants cited personal costs associated with the superintendency, challenges associated with demands on the superintendent's time, and challenges associated with the local community most often. Non-white participants cited challenges associated with issues of school finance, challenges associated with school boards, political challenges, challenges associated with organizational change, and challenges associated with student achievement most often. Conversely, white participants cited challenges associated with student achievement and with organizational deficits least often, while non-white participants cited challenges associated with the local community, knowledge deficits, role relationships, predecessors, isolation, personnel administration, and situational challenges least often.

Table 4

*Percentage of Study Participants Experiencing Challenges by Race/Ethnicity*

Experiential Category	White ( <i>n</i> = 16)	Non-White ( <i>n</i> = 4)
School finance	63	100
Demands on the superintendent's time	75	50
Personal costs associated with the superintendency	75	50
Local community	75	25
School boards	63	75
Organization's leadership team	63	50
Political challenges	50	75
Knowledge deficits	56	25
Organizational change	38	75
Media	38	50
Role relationships	44	25
Superintendent's predecessor	38	25
Situational challenges	38	25
Student achievement	25	75
Sense of isolation	31	25
Organizational deficits	25	50
Personnel administration	31	25

**Variation by age band.** For the purpose of this study, participants' age bands corresponded to those used in previous national studies of superintendents (Glass & Franceschini, 2007; Kowalski et al., 2011). Descriptive data in Table 5 reflect two noteworthy patterns across age bands. The percentage of participants identifying personal costs associated with the superintendency and challenges associated with the local community, knowledge deficits, and predecessors progressively increased across

higher age bands. Conversely, the percentage of participants identifying challenges associated with school boards, the organization's leadership team, and a sense of isolation progressively decreased across higher age bands.

Table 5

*Percentage of Study Participants Experiencing Challenges by Age Band*

Experiential Category	< 46 years ( <i>n</i> = 4)	46 – 60 years ( <i>n</i> = 14)	> 60 years ( <i>n</i> = 2)
School finance	50	79	50
Demands on the superintendent's time	75	64	100
Personal costs associated with the superintendency	50	71	100
Local community	50	64	100
School boards	10	57	50
Organization's leadership team	75	64	0
Political challenges	50	57	50
Knowledge deficits	25	50	100
Organizational change	50	36	100
Media	50	36	50
Role relationships	75	29	50
Superintendent's predecessor	25	36	50
Situational challenges	0	43	50
Student achievement	75	21	50
Sense of isolation	75	21	0
Organizational deficits	0	36	50
Personnel administration	0	43	0

**Variation by locale.** For the purpose of this study, participant locales corresponded to those adopted by the National Center for Education Statistics (n.d.) for



use with the Common Core of Data. Descriptive data in Table 6 reflect two noteworthy patterns across locales. The percentage of participants identifying personal costs associated with the superintendency, political challenges, and challenges associated with the media progressively increased as locales became more urban. Conversely, the percentage of participants identifying challenges associated with personnel administration progressively decreased as locales became more urban.

Table 6

*Percentage of Study Participants Experiencing Challenges by Locale*

Experiential Category	Rural ( <i>n</i> = 13)	Town ( <i>n</i> = 4)	Suburb ( <i>n</i> = 1)	City ( <i>n</i> = 2)
School finance	77	50	100	50
Demands on the superintendent's time	85	50	0	50
Personal costs associated with the superintendency	62	75	100	100
Local community	62	100	0	50
School boards	62	50	100	100
Organization's leadership team	69	25	0	100
Political challenges	46	50	100	100
Knowledge deficits	54	75	0	0
Organizational change	38	50	100	50
Media	23	50	100	100
Role relationships	46	25	0	50
Superintendent's predecessor	31	50	100	0
Situational challenges	38	50	0	0
Student achievement	38	25	0	50
Sense of isolation	38	0	0	50
Organizational deficits	31	25	100	0
Personnel administration	38	25	0	0

**Variation by point of entry.** For the purpose of this study, participants' points of entry into the superintendency were described by the bimodal categories of internal and external. Internal entrants ascended to the superintendency from other professional positions within the same school organization, while external entrants entered the superintendency from other school organizations or professional settings. As illustrated by Table 7, noteworthy variations existed between internal and external entrants in four experiential categories. Internal entrants identified challenges associated with role relationships and situational challenges at least twice as frequently as external entrants. At the same time, external entrants identified challenges associated with organizational change over four times more frequently, and identified challenges associated with organizational deficits over twice as frequently, as internal entrants. Internal entrants cited personal costs associated with the superintendency and challenges associated with school finance, demands on the superintendent's time, the local community, and the organization's leadership team most often, while external entrants cited challenges associated with school boards and organizational change most often. Conversely, internal entrants cited challenges associated with organizational change and organizational deficits least often, while external entrants cited situational challenges and challenges associated with role relationships and personnel administration least often.

Table 7

*Percentage of Study Participants Experiencing Challenges by Point of Entry*

Experiential Category	Internal ( <i>n</i> = 11)	External ( <i>n</i> = 9)
School finance	73	67
Demands on the superintendent's time	73	67
Personal costs associated with the superintendency	73	67
Local community	73	56
School boards	55	78
Organization's leadership team	73	44
Political challenges	45	67
Knowledge deficits	55	44
Organizational change	18	78
Media	36	44
Role relationships	55	22
Superintendent's predecessor	27	44
Situational challenges	45	22
Student achievement	27	44
Sense of isolation	27	33
Organizational deficits	18	44
Personnel administration	36	22

**Research Question 4: Mediating Strategies**

While participants experienced numerous challenges during the entry period, the array of mediating strategies they applied toward overcoming those challenges is relatively small. For the most part, they responded to challenges by applying two dominant mediating strategies – communication and collaboration – in novel ways that matched specific circumstances. Beyond those two, a smaller collection of remaining

strategies was much less prevalent among participants. The entire array of mediating strategies may be thematically grouped into nine types. Table 8 delineates those nine types and indicates their prevalence of use among participants. This section describes participants' use of each type, starting with those most prevalent and progressing toward less common types. The section concludes with observations about participants' acquiescence to challenges, particularly to the personal costs they associated with the superintendency, in the absence of other, more effective mediating strategies.

Table 8

*Prevalence of Mediating Strategies Identified by Study Participants*

Mediating Strategy	<i>n</i>	%
Collaborating with others	20	100
Communicating with others	20	100
Leveraging the formal entry plan	16	80
Engaging in organizational learning activities	11	55
Developing unique or unusual strategies	9	45
Seeking professional counsel from others	8	40
Relying on or articulating a professional vision	8	40
Engaging in purposeful organizational development	5	25
Maintaining or demonstrating a positive attitude or outlook	3	15

**Collaborating with others.** Every participant described collaborating with others to mediate challenges they experienced during the entry period. Further, participants' collaboration consistently extended to both internal and external partners. That is, they described efforts to collaborate with colleagues inside the school organization and with community leaders and other stakeholder groups outside the school organization.

Within the school organization, participants frequently described collaboration with cabinet-level leadership teams, school-based administrators, teachers, and other colleagues. Typically, that collaboration was intended to mediate specific challenges. In response to challenges associated with significant budget reductions, for example, one incoming superintendent assembled an ad hoc budget task force charged with prioritizing programs and providing recommendations that he subsequently used to frame his annual budget recommendation to the school board and board of county commissioners:

...the CFO divided our line item budget into programs... alternative education, board of education, business services, communities in schools, custodial, elementary education, fine arts, gifted, guidance... Each one of those has a program manager... [who prepared] a budget at a 2% cut, a 4% cut, an 8% cut... each one of these people's going to get about ten minutes to stand up before a committee and tell 'em what'll happen, and then the committee is going to get to vote individually on what their priorities are for spending. So each [committee member] is going to have a ballot, and they're going to get to vote – here's my priorities. They're going to have a certain amount of points that they can allocate... So each one's going to fill out a ballot and give it to the CFO and leave. And he's going to, in the next few days, put the points on an Excel spreadsheet, push a button, and it's going to prioritize expenditures.

Another incoming superintendent assembled a team of teachers and administrators with which he collaboratively reviewed student achievement data, identified specific improvement priorities, and generated programmatic interventions and enhancements to overcome challenging gaps in achievement among subgroups of the school district's

student population. Other participants described initiating collaborative processes for the selection of candidates to fill administrative vacancies in order to overcome challenges associated with deficits in the school district's leadership team. At the same time, several participants described creating teacher advisory groups with which they collaborated to mediate organizational deficits, build momentum to overcome resistance to organizational change, and generate solutions to instructional deficits contributing to low student achievement rates. Participants also described working closely with their school boards, in whole and in part, to overcome challenges associated with those boards' own internal efficacy, with the delicate negotiation of board-superintendent relationships, and with issues of school finance and student achievement.

Outside the school organization, participants frequently described collaboration with parent groups and other stakeholder constituencies, boards of county commissioners, law enforcement agencies, and civic and religious groups. As with their collaboration with internal partners, participants' work with external partners was typically intended to mediate specific challenges facing them during the entry period. One participant, for example, worked closely with local law enforcement and emergency management officials to mediate a situational challenge he experienced early in his superintendency:

There was a shooting in [our community] that was not connected to the school, but it just happened the same night that we had a ball game up here. Well, the next week, we were scheduled to have an inter-county game between [two high schools in our district]. We had gotten word that there was going to be some retaliation at the game... So, where we normally have six or seven officers at the game, we had like 25 officers there. And we had a mobile command unit paid for

with homeland security funds... We brought all our resources together – sheriff's department, the emergency management people... to make sure we had a safe environment for all the students and spectators. [At the next] principals' meeting, I brought our sheriff in... to talk to them about gang awareness and what you might be looking for... You've got to have collaboration with other county officials when it comes to the safety of students.

Several participants described collaborating with county managers and boards of county commissioners to secure funding in response to dramatic reductions in their operational funding, while others described similar efforts to raise revenue for capital projects in response to highly contextual challenges associated with unusual growth in student enrollment. Still others described collaborating with local non-profit groups and service organizations to improve low student achievement rates and to mediate broader issues within their communities that intersected the school organization. One participant, for example, collaborated with local Rotary and Kiwanis organizations to provide tutoring services for students after school hours. Another partnered with a local non-profit organization to provide dental and medical care to students as rising poverty diminished their access to those services. Other incoming superintendents, working to improve low student achievement rates, partnered with local churches and faith-based organizations to secure tutoring sites throughout their communities so that students and parents could access those services more conveniently and comfortably.

While participants explicitly linked their internal and external collaboration efforts to specific challenges they experienced, they simultaneously acknowledged that those efforts also served as a mediating force more broadly. While they collaborated to

overcome specific, immediate challenges, their collaboration further created networks of partnership and support that they could leverage in the future. In that sense, they saw collaboration as a useful strategy not only for mediating emergent challenges, but also for enhancing their school organizations' internal and external capacity to respond to changing conditions in the future. They also noted that collaboration with internal and external partners enhanced their own efficacy by increasing their credibility as leaders and bringing transparency to their work, both of which promoted support and engagement among stakeholders inside and outside their school organizations.

**Communicating with others.** Every participant likewise described communicating with others as a strategy for mediating challenges they experienced during the entry period. While participants acknowledged that their collaboration and communication were fundamentally interconnected at a conceptual level, they also emphasized that communication served additional purposes *beyond* enabling successful collaboration. Beyond its role in collaboration, communication also served to engender trust and confidence, clarify expectations, strengthen relationships, and overcome specific challenges participants experienced during the entry period.

Communication with their employing school boards to mediate associated challenges was especially common among participants. For many participants, that communication served to overcome difficulties they experienced as they worked to build trust and cultivate effective professional relationships with school board members. Describing the importance of regular, proactive communication with his school board, one participant explained, “Developing that trust, building that relationship and trust with the board was critical. Never let 'em be surprised. Always make sure they can count on



you to keep 'em informed.” Participants described both formal and informal communication with their school boards, ranging in format from face-to-face office meetings to telephone calls to email messaging. Several participants described carving out significant portions of their business days so that they could visit individually with school board members in casual settings:

In addition to meeting them twice a month for a regularly scheduled board meeting, I set up one-on-one sessions with them, and I take it out of this office. I set it up where they meet me in a local restaurant with a private area, and it's either a breakfast or a lunch. And I do that entire week. I have my executive secretary schedule two of them a day. And that has been phenomenal for me – just getting to hear their point of views one-on-one. Things that they may not say in a large group, they'll share it with me privately, and then I can say, “Well, I'll look into that,” or, “Here's why we have done this,” or, “Maybe you may want to look at this from another point of view.” You know, you get to have that face time with them.

Beyond communicating with school board members to build trust and establish positive relationships, participants also described their efforts to keep them informed about critical issues facing the school district and to gauge their individual reactions to important decisions. Those communications were intended either to ameliorate disagreements within the school board or prevent existing disagreements from exacerbating already difficult challenges they sought to overcome. One participant, for example, described contacting each school board member individually to discuss key appointments to the district's leadership team before taking a formal employment recommendation to the

school board for approval in a business meeting. Another described sending weekly updates to school board members via email to keep them updated on significant changes to curriculum and instruction designed to overcome challenges associated with student achievement. Others still described daily telephone or personal contact with their school board chairs to share updates on progress with important initiatives and to discuss community reactions to the school district's efforts. While several participants described the particularly important relationship between the superintendent and school board chair, participants were nearly unanimous in their belief that regular, proactive, personal communication with all school board members was an important technique for building trust, cultivating effective board-superintendent relationships, and mediating other challenges that could be worsened by complications at the board level.

Participants also described frequent communication with employees of the school organization, especially for the purpose of setting expectations and building consensus for organizational change in the face of resistance. One participant described carving out 90 minutes from each business day to visit schools and talk personally with teachers and staff members about his vision for the school district and to draw explicit connections between his vision and their own work. By talking with employees in their own work settings, he sought to make those discussions inviting and comfortable and to carry his message directly “into the trenches.” Another participant described meeting with members of his senior leadership team each morning at 7:00 AM to ensure that his senior leaders understood his expectations and priorities and to exchange information about challenges that required their collective efforts. Others described using administrative staff meetings as a vehicle for communicating expectations to principals and helping to

ensure that those expectations were effectively disseminated to schools throughout the district.

Likewise, participants commonly described communicating with members of the broader local community in order to cultivate support for their change efforts and to strengthen institutional partnerships with community agencies and organizations. Several participants, for example, described parent and community forums through which they articulated the financial challenges facing their school districts and built support for increased local school funding. Another described holding a series of town hall meetings with parents to explain his reasons for closing a small community school in response to overwhelming budget challenges and to mediate community controversy triggered by his decision. Several participants described speaking engagements with local community organizations like Rotary clubs, chambers of commerce, local economic development groups, and non-profit organizations to articulate their vision and goals for the school district and to illustrate their responsiveness to the interests of those groups. Finally, one participant described efforts to reach out to parents and local faith-based organizations through personal appearances and discussions aimed at overcoming widespread distrust of the school organization in a community torn by racial tension. For him, those efforts were intended to communicate the sincerity of his commitment to equality and to help the community recognize and trust the school district's commitment to equitable educational opportunities for all children.

For participants, communication with others was as much about the symbolic value of their efforts as it was about the specific message they articulated. One participant's story illustrates that point well. Entering a school district with an

adversarial, almost combative relationship with the local newspaper, he immediately sought to mediate that challenge by proactively reaching out to its editor. Rather than waiting for the editor to contact him – or, worse, reacting after-the-fact to harsh treatment in published news stories – he initiated several face-to-face meetings with the editor to preemptively discuss key issues and challenges facing the school district:

After I was announced publicly, he's the first person I went and met with... I took the initiative and went. Out of the five times that I've met with him, he's invited me once, and I've been down there four times. And when there's a big issue coming... I went and gave him a heads up. I said, "Look, this is coming down." And it was, "OK, I appreciate you letting me know." So that's what I've tried to do... I know at some point they're going to turn on me. But, like I said... I'm going to try to work with him...

His efforts reflect a duality of purpose common to participants. Simultaneously, he was proactive in shaping the story by explicitly advancing his own message, and he sent a powerful signal about his own leadership style by crossing the tumultuous divide between the school district and local newspaper to create a positive relationship in the face of adversity. His communication was as much about the implicit message symbolized by his gesture as it was about the explicit message he expressed.

**Leveraging the formal entry plan.** Beyond using them strictly to outline the scope of their transition work during the entry period, 16 participants described leveraging formal entry plans to mediate specific challenges they experienced during the entry period. Predominately, participants used their plans to mediate challenges associated with demands on their time. Immersed in a work environment where “there

are so many things coming at you that it'd be easy just to be going everywhere,” these participants used their formal entry plans to re-center their attention around established priorities when competing events, disparate activities, and an unrelenting pace pulled their focus away from their goals. As one participant explained:

...I go back and look at [my entry plan], and I'm like, “You know, I still haven't done that – I've got to...” You have that road map, you have that vision, you have that goal, that end in mind – rather than running down this trail or that trail or this other trail and never focusing on the end goal...

One veteran superintendent explained that his previous experiences led him to develop a formal entry plan upon his transition to a new school district specifically to mitigate against the day-to-day activities that can wholly consume a superintendent's time and distract him from important goals:

I realized I didn't follow the other ones as closely. Once you get in it, on the job, the day-to-day things take up your time... and emergencies... and so, if you don't just sit down and take the time to put it in writing, you kind of get pulled away from it...

Other participants leveraged their formal entry plans as mechanisms for broader strategic planning efforts they initiated during the entry period. For some, that meant simply updating the entry plan periodically to reflect changing organizational conditions and emerging priorities based on knowledge they accrued during entry:

It was also a way for me to think things out, too, because once I put it down, what I typically did was... go back and modify or add to it, or enhance it. So, it was kind of a living plan... here's something I want to remember to do the second

semester... or, I've thought about this more and maybe this is something else that I want to do... So, it was literally a living plan, and I could keep adding to it and working with it over time...

For others, however, that meant using the entry plan as a vehicle for collecting organizational data and perspectives that they subsequently channeled directly into a proper strategic planning document for the school district. One participant, for example, developed formal strategic priorities around district restructuring, raising student achievement, and managing budget deficits driven by organizational learning and collaboration efforts embedded in his entry plan. Those strategic priorities, enabled and informed by his entry plan, were formally adopted by the school board and served as a blueprint for organizational change. Another participant leveraged his formal entry plan to identify and adopt formal strategic priorities around instruction and student achievement, community partnerships, school finance, and teacher quality.

Finally, some participants leveraged their formal entry plans to overcome organizational resistance and political challenges. One participant, for example, entered the superintendency in a district sharply divided by deep political polarity among school board members and within the broader community. That political polarity led many to criticize his appointment to the superintendency and question his ability to lead organizational change. He leveraged his formal entry plan to shift the public discourse away from that skeptical criticism and toward more substantive issues facing the school district:

It moved the argument about whether or not I was the right guy, a capable guy, or whatever, to saying, "Here's my plan. You got something better? Let me know,

and I'll add to it.” It kind of gave me sort of that runway from which to take off. People could argue whether or not those were the right goals, but it's kind of hard to argue that they're important, because they're all important... It gave me sort of that azimuth, and it took a lot of heat off of... wondering about *me*... It made the discussion about substantive things that we were doing. Not everybody's going to walk into [a county] with the political controversy that we've got here. And not everybody's going to come with the background that I've got, and people wondering whether or not I was prepared or not prepared and all that. But that entry plan... gave me kind of the concrete game plan to at least get started.

**Engaging in organizational learning activities.** Eleven participants described deliberate engagement in organizational learning activities in order to mediate specific knowledge deficits that challenged them during the entry period. Several external entrants to the position attempted to learn as much as possible about their new school districts prior to their entry into the superintendency, but found that their most valuable learning did not occur until they actually began their work. As one observed:

[You] do as much research as you can, knowing that you'll never know the real facts 'til you get there... because once you get there, you're going to really see not just what's on the surface of the district, but how things work in the district, how people communicate, what processes are in place, what cultural attitudes are there – I mean, just so much to learn!

At the same time, several internal entrants to the position explained that, while they had learned much about their school organizations through their previous professional experiences, their prior knowledge was limited by the perspectives of their earlier roles.

Upon entry into the superintendency, their perspectives shifted in ways that required them to learn about dimensions of their organizations to which they had not previously attended.

Both internal and external entrants accrued much of their organizational learning from purposeful interactions with others. Several participants described telephone conversations or personal meetings with their predecessors for the purpose of learning about major initiatives, organizational culture, and district operations. A greater number of participants, though, described deliberate, structured, face-to-face interviews with colleagues, board members, and community members through which they deliberately sought out and learned about important school district features and characteristics. As one participant, who conducted individual interviews with school board members, senior staff members, principals, and community leaders, explained:

I got to talk to a lot of the key leaders in a short period of time, and I got a feel from them on what they valued. When you go to a new district, you want to see where they are and learn what the cultures and traditions are. You're going to be accountable for making improvements, but I think you have to honor the past as you do that, so I heard a lot of stories about “here's how we do it in [this] county” and “here's how we got to where we are.” So, I learned a lot of those things by sitting down and talking to people – I just think I learned a lot.

Beyond learning from others, several participants additionally described conducting extensive reviews of documents, reports, and organizational data in order to mediate knowledge deficits. As one participant described:



I went through documents – the [strategic plan], the Title I plans – you know, just grabbing any documents I could – the facility maps, budget, staffing – anything I could pull that they already had – and just tried to learn as much as I could during that time... and I knew my weakness was budget... I had never done a school district budget. I had been part of it, but I'd never completed it, and so I did a lot of work on school district finance and looking at their budget, trying to learn as much as I could regarding that because I knew that was my weakness.

Other participants described identifying key individuals in the school organization to whom they repeatedly turned for organizational knowledge. One, for example, identified an assistant superintendent in his district who was “a wealth of knowledge... friendly, helpful... She greatly helped me and answered many questions during that time frame, and got me assimilated into the community and into the school system.”

Finally, for a few participants, organizational learning also included less formal activities. One participant, for example, described “just being out in schools and watching my principals, listening to what they do, walking the halls – that's all key.” For him and others like him, informal opportunities to learn about the school district's operations and underlying culture were important as they worked to mediate gaps in their knowledge and understanding of the school organization.

**Developing unique or unusual strategies.** Nine participants developed unique or unusual strategies to mediate specific challenges they experienced during the entry period. That is, they engineered individualized strategies in response to fact-specific challenges. One participant, for example, who struggled with the loss of privacy associated with life in the “fishbowl” relieved some of that personal anxiety and pressure

through physical escape. When she felt the need to “let her hair down,” she simply left the community where she worked and traveled to a larger suburban destination where she was not so readily identified as a superintendent and felt greater freedom to lower her guard against public scrutiny. Another superintendent, responding to the challenge of a leadership team she did not believe was competent to assist her in leading the school district, terminated the employment of all her school district's senior administrative staff and replaced them with new leaders. For her, the strategy was drastic but wholly necessary:

There were six administrators, and I terminated all of them and made them all reapply for their jobs. And by doing that, I was able to clean it up in that way.

So, in removing all of those leaders and then hiring my own fresh, new leaders – bringing them in under my style of training and leadership – that has paid off for us.

Several participants developed creative strategies for managing significant budget reductions. One, for example, accessed the school district's fund balance and leveraged accrued savings to offset state and federal reductions in lieu of imposing employee layoffs. Another offset nearly 25% of his school district's budget reduction by closing one of its schools and absorbing displaced students into other schools throughout the district (ironically, creating a whole new set of challenges that proved even harder to mediate). A third participant established a novel program prioritization process to manage his district's budget reduction. Finally, one participant created an employee assistance program to help displaced school employees acquire job training, new

occupational skills, and additional resources when his school district was forced to lay off 100 staff members in order to balance its annual operating budget.

In order to improve broad patterns of low student achievement and to build his community's capacity to sustain itself in the face of substantial changes to the local economy and culture, one participant leveraged federal funds to initiate a community literacy program. Teachers in the school district taught early literacy skills to three-year olds at community centers and churches, and high school students interested in careers in public education were employed as teacher assistants for the program. Over time, he expanded the program to include health care for impoverished students and mini-sessions focused on parenting skills, financial literacy, and school success for their parents. As he explained:

These kids that we're training right now are going to be the ones that are going to be taking care of us when we're in a nursing home. So, we've got to teach them all, because the ones that are in the middle and the lower end are *the only ones* that are doing to stay here, and we want that middle and lower end to be as high as it possibly can while they're taking care of the community.

Finally, two participants purposefully and explicitly drew on their professional training as a source of knowledge and perspective when faced with the challenges of their work. One leveraged highly specialized professional skills he acquired as a national curriculum auditor to address deficiencies in curriculum and instruction that were producing patterns of low student achievement throughout his school district. Another participant drew on academic knowledge and leadership skills he developed through doctoral course work, which he began at the same time he entered the superintendency.

Doing so helped him to gain perspective and approach challenges with a sound theoretical foundation. Turning to those academic experiences opened “a whole new dimension that I had no idea about” as he sought to understand and mediate challenges he experienced as a novice incoming superintendent.

**Seeking professional counsel from others.** Eight participants sought professional counsel from others in response to challenges they experienced during the entry period. Among them, five participants specifically described initiating contact with the school board attorney for assistance with legal issues. While one participant described a specific instance when he contacted the school board attorney for help with an imminent legal concern regarding student registration and enrollment procedures, others more generally characterized routine contact with the school board attorney on matters of law as a regular feature of their work. For them, regular contact with the school board attorney served to mediate deficits in their knowledge or understanding of employment law and other legal principles intersecting various challenges they experienced.

These participants also sought the advice and counsel of mentors, exclusively other practicing superintendents from whom they felt comfortable seeking advice and feedback about the challenges facing them. In some cases, those mentors were self-selected by participants based on familiarity they gained through relationships developed prior to their entry into the superintendency. A few other participants, however, were appointed mentors, or “executive coaches,” through professional organizations. Participants contacted their mentors to develop perspective about challenges and to

overcome a sense of isolation they attributed to the superintendent's uniquely demanding role in the school organization.

**Relying on or articulating a professional vision.** Eight participants relied on or articulated a professional vision in response to challenges they experienced during the entry period. Focusing on their own professional vision for their work and for education as a social enterprise grounded and re-centered them when challenges threatened to disrupt their efforts or destabilize their leadership. One participant expressed the value she found in focusing on her vision in the form of advice to other incoming superintendents:

When you become a superintendent, you will have a lot of people trying to influence you – whether it's your board, your community, your staff... You have a lot of folks who are stakeholders. Be sure to listen, but know yourself when you go in. Know what you are about, and be strong in what you're about, and let your superintendency be yours – not what someone else feels it should be, or what public pressure tells you it should be. Stay true to your values and what you know is important, which is children.

For others, professional vision provided the lens through which they evaluated options and made decisions when faced with seemingly insurmountable challenges. As one participant explained:

It's all about children in the classroom. [Every] decision needs to be made within the context of, how is it impacting the children in the classroom and the education of those children? How is it impacting the teachers in the classroom and how they're able to work with students? What is the effect of your decision on student

learning? That's why we're here. That's why every one of us is employed... to ensure that students are learning, that they're getting an education. So every decision has to be predicated on, what is its effect ultimately on the classroom?

What does that mean for student learning?

His professional vision provided the litmus test by which the superior choice in response to immediate challenges would prevail.

Others mediated emergent challenges by articulating a professional vision and working to spread it throughout their school organizations. Challenged by a racially divided community, one participant worked deliberately to articulate and express through his actions a professional vision grounded in equity. In so doing, he sought both to change the culture of his school organization and to overcome suspicion and tension within the broader community. For another, internalizing and communicating a compelling professional vision helped to overcome micropolitical challenges that threatened her efforts to improve student achievement and bring change to her school organization:

[A] superintendent has got to know what they want, what they believe... don't just be a ping pong ball being battered back and forth by the forces that are out there, internal and external... Know what you believe and communicate. Have your elevator speech – know what you believe so deeply that you can communicate it with passion, conviction... If you know well enough what you expect and where you hope that you can lead the system... people are going to have confidence, and they're going to try to follow you in that.

Another participant, working to reunite a deeply polarized school district in the wake of a prolonged political battle over issues of building capacity and student assignment, made a conscious choice to meet in large groups with the district's thousands of employees specifically to promote his vision and unify the district around it:

It'd be like 1,000 employees per session. I would introduce myself... and we'd walk through mission, vision, core beliefs. And I was... up in the stands with a microphone telling my personal story. To me, that was very important. And now I talk to every group of newcomers that comes in... I tell them my personal story and what my standards are. 'Cause leadership to me is about infusing people with your vision. Because in the absence of that, they're gonna just kind of go in a direction that other people take them.

Participants' expression of a compelling professional vision not only mediated immediate challenges, but also influenced organizational conditions in ways that would prove advantageous as other challenges emerged in the future.

**Engaging in purposeful organizational development.** Five participants initiated purposeful organizational development efforts in response to challenges associated with process deficits, patterns of low student achievement, and politics. One participant, for example, arrived in her new school district to find that it lacked sufficient business processes and internal controls to operate efficiently and effectively. In response, she focused on organizational development activities over a one-year period to identify key business operations and define specific processes necessary to ensure their proper execution. Her efforts to establish “standard operating procedures” for the school

organization were aimed at developing its internal capacity to function with precision, consistency, and transparency.

Another superintendent initiated a comprehensive strategic planning and organizational development process in response to persistent patterns of low student achievement in her school district. She engineered an organization-wide mechanism to identify key leverage points for improvement across four domains, including instruction, school-community partnerships, finance, and human capital. She led the organization to articulate improvement goals in each area and facilitated the school board's adoption of that organizational blueprint for change during the coming years.

A third participant arrived in his new school district to find substantial political problems within the school board, and between the school board and the community, that had substantially depressed morale throughout the school organization. In response, he launched a bifurcated effort simultaneously targeting two tiers of the organization, the school board and the school district's staff. At the board level, he orchestrated training and consensus-building activities to unite members; at the district level, he highlighted improvements to school board unity and effectiveness and initiated team-building activities designed to reduce interpersonal tension, unify employees as a team, and re-energize their collective efforts.

In each case, participants looked deeply at underlying organizational conditions causing more visible challenges and worked to develop the internal capacities of their organizations, empowering them to respond more effectively to the emergent problems they faced.



**Maintaining or demonstrating a positive attitude or outlook.** For three participants, maintaining or demonstrating a positive attitude or outlook served as a mediating force against emerging challenges. For one, developing a positive outlook toward his work in the face of numerous challenges associated with school finance, his employing school board, and a deteriorating community infrastructure helped him to find clarity, purpose, and confidence in his work that empowered him to confront those challenges with purpose and poise:

I made a very conscious decision that I was not going to work to keep a job. I was going to work and do what I thought was right. And that, if my board did not feel it was the right thing that I had done, I really did not need to serve as their superintendent, because I wasn't a good fit. And so, that gave me a lot of peace...

Another developed a positive attitude toward the local media despite its extensive, protracted friction with the school district. He found the capacity to work effectively with local media outlets by adopting a positive attitude about their criticism. His outlook on friction with the local media was grounded in a broader, healthy attitude characterized by humility and perspective:

Some people automatically dislike you because you're a bureaucrat – you're an educator – but you can't take it personally. And the other thing you gotta learn – that it's not your district. Even though you're the educational expert, it's their money, their kids, their schools. It's not your district. It belongs to them, and the moment you start thinking it's your district is when you're going to get in trouble. You gotta have an ego to do this job. You can't do it without an ego. But, you can't let your ego dominate things. You know, it's not *my* way or *your* way – it's a

*better* way. [The superintendency] is a community service. It's a lifelong service that you provide for people. So, you have to be a good steward. You have to be a servant. And it's not about you. And the people that start thinking it's about them and they're the saviors – they're the ones that get in trouble.

Finally, one participant found that a positive outlook toward his work served to mediate substantial demands on his time early in his entry into the superintendency. For him, a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction in his work helped to overcome its costs:

It's hard to describe... that feeling of accomplishment that you have when you put something in place and you see it through and it really works – to help children's lives. That's why you do it. Because you wouldn't do this job day in and day out just to tackle the challenges. There's got to be some light at the end of the tunnel... and usually there is. It makes you feel good, and it's all worthwhile when you can do that. It really is.

**Acquiescence to personal costs.** While participants described strategies for mediating all other challenges they experienced during the entry period, they cited no strategies for mitigating against the substantial personal costs they associated with the superintendency. The highly adaptable mediating strategies of communication and collaboration they generally applied to many other challenges had little applicability to and offered no relief from the personal costs to their mental, emotional, and physical well-being. Some participants spoke broadly about abstract ambitions to achieve “balance” between their personal and professional lives, but they cited no specific examples of those efforts, even when pressed to do so. One participant, for example, explained his desire to achieve “balance” by describing his intention to take a vacation

with his wife. When pressed for specifics, though, he did not recall their last vacation together – except for a trip to a professional conference on which she accompanied him three years earlier – and explained how taking a vacation during the upcoming summer seemed unlikely given that his time would be consumed by budget development and preparations for a new school year. Another participant, describing how she concealed health problems from her school board and colleagues to guard against any perception of weakness on her part, acknowledged how “ridiculous” and dangerous her choice was and noted her ambition to lead a more “balanced” life. She noted, however, that she delayed treatment for as long as possible and only ultimately disclosed her illness when she was hospitalized for surgery. Another participant, torn by the thought that their long-distance relocation for his first superintendency precluded an early cancer diagnosis that could have saved his wife's life, cited no mechanism for coping with either that profound psychological burden or his wife's imminent passing. He did note, ironically, that he was late for his participant interview because he had discuss with his school board chair the possibility of taking a two-week leave of absence so that he could be with his wife during her last days.

In the absence of other, healthier mediating strategies for dealing with those challenges, participants responded to them largely with a sense of acquiescence. That is, they implicitly accepted that those personal costs are simply the unavoidable byproduct of conditions surrounding the superintendency. That notion of acceptable loss is further explored in chapter five.

**Research Question 5: Effectiveness**

During their individual interviews, most participants organically embedded an assessment of their effectiveness into broader descriptions of the mediating strategies they applied to challenges they experienced. Participants who did not naturally embed related assessments into their discussion of specific strategies were specifically asked later in their interviews to reflect upon and characterize the effectiveness of strategies they had identified and described. Participants commonly assigned great value to the mediating strategies they applied to challenges associated with entry into the superintendency. They spoke frequently about the positive effects of their mediating efforts and typically offered positive appraisals of their effectiveness.

Since participants offered their appraisals in narrative terms and generally found each to be successful, they are sequenced within this section based on the prevalence and degree of participants' emphasis. This sequencing provides a faithful presentation of their perspectives and begins to suggest implications for professional practice that are more fully explored in chapter five. Those mediating strategies that participants appraised with the greatest emphasis appear first, and the section progresses toward mediating strategies participants appraised with less emphasis, in the following order:

- Leveraging the formal entry plan
- Seeking professional counsel from others
- Communicating with others
- Collaborating with others
- Engaging in organizational learning activities
- Relying on or articulating a professional vision

- Maintaining or demonstrating a positive attitude or outlook
- Developing unique or unusual strategies
- Engaging in purposeful organizational development

In particular, participants who developed formal entry plans described them as highly effective tools. About his formal entry plan, one participant observed, “It was critical. It was critical. I don't know how I could've survived without it.” Commonly, participants explained that their formal entry plans kept them focused on important priorities that would have otherwise been lost in the hectic tempo of their work. As one participant explained:

It's been helpful, because it's kept me focused, because there have been a lot of distractions that could've easily, easily gotten me off on tangents. Being able to come back to that [plan] and say, “Yeah, I need to stay on this because this is what I feel is most important...” I think the primary thing is, it's just helped to keep me focused and moving in that direction so I don't get off on a lot of different rabbit chases that keep me away from what I think is important.

Participants commonly echoed his assessment. As another observed:

Honestly, at least for me, having a plan in place was the biggest asset – to have a plan at least for that first 90 days to keep you focused on stuff, just because there are so many things coming at you that it'd be easy just to be going everywhere...

Another participant commented that the formal entry plan “helped me immensely... it helped me pace myself,” while still another explained that “it focused my thinking... it was tremendously helpful. It ended up being a very good activity to go through.” Even those few participants who offered mixed assessments of formal entry planning attributed

their mixed assessments not to the strategy itself, but instead to specific limitations in their execution of the strategy. One, for example, commented, “I wish I would've had more time to work on the [entry] plan,” while another discovered that his plan was underdeveloped in a few areas as he progressed through the entry period. As he explained, “I had to make minor adjustments to [the plan] as I went, as I learned more about the district and learned more about what I had here.”

Participants also assigned great value to professional counsel they received from others. For some, the counsel of their predecessors was especially beneficial. One participant, for example, appreciated opportunities to meet regularly with the interim superintendent who preceded her in order to discuss school district issues as she transitioned into the position:

He really did a phenomenal job of being a great mentor for me and assisting me with the transition into the job. He and I would meet every week to discuss plans for the district and to make decisions, and I think that that is probably one of the best models I've seen for a superintendent brand new to the superintendency – to have an experienced superintendent start with you as a mentor for the transition. So, the transition was phenomenal for me... That's the best experience for me, ever. It's great.

Another participant, who enjoyed a very long transition into the superintendency, assigned great value to his predecessor's efforts to facilitate his gradual, smooth transition into the position:

The transition was really, really a great transition. The previous [superintendent] had asked me to come over specifically with the goal of becoming the

[superintendent], so my actual transition would've been a three-year transition.

He gradually gave me more responsibilities as I went through the days and the years... It was really important, because I had a safety net... Whenever we got to the difficult decision, I could always just walk into his office and bounce it off of him, and he would give me ideas... There was always that safety net there... He [still] lives here in town, and occasionally I'll ask him questions... and that helps out a lot. That's where those connections that we talked about earlier really come in handy. That's a really important thing to have.

Participants also found significant value in communicating with others and described it as an effective strategy for mediating a broad array of experiential challenges. One participant, who prioritized direct communication with district employees, described visiting schools regularly and riding buses so that he could interact directly with teachers, bus drivers, and other staff members. He noted that those employees “really appreciate” his efforts and that communicating directly with them in their natural work settings has fostered a sense of collegiality and support for his leadership. Other participants described how direct, personal, frequent communication with their school boards minimized political friction and cultivated effective professional relationships. Several others directly attributed specific financial successes within their local communities to communication:

We knew that [tax referendum] was going to be a significant event in the fall. We provide[d] information, and we wanted to be sure that people had the information so that the voters could make an informed decision. We worked hand-in-hand with community groups and our schools in getting information out to the public...

and then the [local] community did elect to approve that [tax referendum] on November 8, and passed it by a margin of 67% approval. It happened to be the highest approval rating in the metro area.

Participants also emphasized, though, that communication was only effective as a mediating strategy when it was both genuine and sustained over time. One participant, who leveraged communication to overcome racial tension within his local community, noted, “I think we've come a long way, but it's a never-ending battle. All it takes is for something to be misconstrued and the people who don't trust you blow it out of proportion.”

Likewise, participants offered positive appraisals of the other mediating strategies they used. They viewed collaboration as an effective strategy both for mediating specific challenges and for creating organizational conditions that would facilitate the resolution of challenges that may emerge in the future. They cited specific positive outcomes from collaboration with individuals inside the school organization and with community groups outside the school organization. In most cases, those benefits accrued to higher student achievement rates through improvements in curriculum design and delivery and to increased organizational capacity through school-community partnerships. Participants also assigned great value to their organizational learning efforts, and explained how taking time during the entry period to survey organizational conditions enriched their understanding and perspectives. They valued both learning from others and gaining organizational knowledge through careful reviews of data, reports, and documents organic to the school organization. They often emphasized the importance of



organizational learning by expressing it as an unequivocal recommendation to future superintendents. One participant admonished future superintendents to:

Know their district first. Know their district... Know the dynamics of the district.

You need to know that as the leader going in. You need to know what is important to the different communities. So, knowing your school district, knowing your staff, knowing your students... again, knowing that history.

Knowing the needs. My single piece of advice is, know your district and all of those are encompassed in it.

For another participant, organizational learning was a central feature of the superintendent's work:

Everywhere you go is an inspection. Look. Annotate what you see you don't like, and then come up with a vision to improve it or make it better for all the kids.

But everything you do and see you inspect. Now, you may not take corrective action right there, but you work at it over time, focusing on things to make it better for all the kids.

While relying on or articulating a professional vision and maintaining or developing a positive attitude were far less prevalent mediating strategies among participants, those who used those strategies found them helpful. Articulating a professional vision proved useful both in reshaping organizational culture and in providing participants a mechanism for evaluating their own decisions in response to challenges they experienced. Likewise, maintaining or developing a positive attitude or outlook provided a few participants with confidence, optimism, and perspective as they worked through the large catalog of challenges they experienced during the entry period.

Participants commonly celebrated the effectiveness of unique or unusual strategies they created in response to specific situational challenges. They acknowledged that it was sometimes difficult to implement unique or unusual strategies that were sophisticated and multifaceted, but they also noted that those strategies produced desirable results for their school organizations. Most notably, one participant, who leveraged new community partnerships and federal funds to create an early literacy program for students, noted that early reaction to the program and initial results were promising despite the significant energy and effort required to deploy an initiative of its scale. Unlike this participant's example, however, the benefits of some unique or unusual strategies were finite. That is, they served only to mediate an immediate manifestation of a broader, more persistent challenge. For example, one participant's use of accrued earnings in the district's fund balance to offset immediate budget reductions was successful in the short term but unsustainable over the longer term. While he used that strategy once to overcome an immediate budget shortfall, he also recognized that it was not a viable long-term solution to the broader financial challenges facing his school district. For that reason, its short-term effectiveness was high, but its long-term effectiveness was low.

Participants offered mixed appraisals of their organizational development efforts. The extent to which those efforts were successful hinged largely on the extent to which they required fundamental organizational change. Organizational development efforts that required less organizational change proved more immediately effective than those that required more organizational change. One participant's efforts to define standard operational processes for her district met with moderate but temporary organizational

resistance and ultimately proved successful once that resistance subsided. Other organizational development efforts, however, met with more substantial resistance or required greater levels of organizational change and had proven only modestly successful when participant data were collected. One participant, for example, leveraged organizational development to overcome political strife within the school board and depressed morale throughout the school district. While he met with success at the board level, depressed morale among school employees proved more resistant to improvement, and his organizational development efforts were only slowly producing modest changes.

Finally, participants offered neither general nor specific strategies for mediating personal costs associated with the superintendency, and analysis of their interview transcripts suggested that they achieved little success in overcoming them. While their acquiescence to those personal costs served to rationalize threats to their psychological, emotional, or physical well-being as the unavoidable opportunity costs of the position itself, their narratives suggest that the personal price they paid to practice in the superintendency was largely unmitigated.

### **Chapter Summary**

Upon their appointment to the superintendency, participants engaged in an intense entry experience and frequently structured their early entry activities through formal entry plans of varying scope and detail. Their early entry activities were commonly intended to help participants learn about the operations, culture, and outcomes of their school organizations, as well as the broader context of their local communities. Throughout the entry period, participants experienced a substantial, complex array of challenges across 17 experiential categories ranging from the purely occupational to the

deeply personal. The frequency with which they experienced some of those challenges varied considerably across several personal characteristics and organizational features. Participants responded to the challenges they experienced by applying nine types of mediating strategies. Most commonly, participants leveraged communication and collaboration strategies to overcome those challenges, typically by applying them in novel ways to match specific contextual features that characterized and informed those challenges. Participants commonly offered positive appraisals of their mediating strategies' effectiveness. However, they cited only minimal, if any, strategies for mediating the often significant personal costs they associated with the superintendency.

## CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to describe how incoming superintendents experience entry into the position. It sought to develop an understanding of how they plan for entry and characterize challenges associated with the entry experience. It also sought to identify and describe strategies they use to overcome challenges they encounter during entry.

This chapter begins with a conceptual discussion of findings. That discussion extends on the presentation of findings by broadly exploring important dimensions of participants' experiences during entry into the superintendency and by drawing connections to previous research. Like the presentation of findings itself, the conceptual discussion is organized around the five research questions presented in this study:

1. How do incoming superintendents plan for their entry into the position?
2. What challenges do incoming superintendents associate with their entry into the position?
3. Are there variations in those challenges based on the personal characteristics of incoming superintendents and the features of their organizations?
4. What strategies do incoming superintendents use to mediate challenges associated with entry into the position?
5. What value do incoming superintendents assign to those mediating strategies?

Implications for practice follow the conceptual discussion of findings. Those implications are grouped around three audiences, including incoming superintendents, school boards, and universities and professional organizations. The chapter continues with a discussion of strengths and limitations associated with the study and a series of

specific recommendations for future research. The chapter concludes with several closing observations about the importance of this research to the broader topic of leadership succession in the superintendency.

### **Conceptual Discussion of Findings**

Several findings from this study warrant further discussion at a conceptual level. In some cases, discussion of those findings broadly characterizes the ways in which they either corroborate or further inform current knowledge; in others, it highlights altogether new contributions from this study to scholarly understanding of the topic. Connections to previous research contextualize findings from this study within the broader knowledge base about leadership succession in the superintendency.

**Research question 1: Planning for entry.** This study described how incoming superintendents experience and plan for entry into the position. While participants' shared conception of the entry period resonates closely with findings from previous research, the prevalence with which they engaged in formal entry planning contrasts sharply with findings from studies conducted five to seven years ago. The following sections explore each of those observations more closely.

***Participants' conception of the entry period.*** Participants almost universally conceptualized the entry period as intense, busy, challenging, and substantially important to their broader success in the superintendency. They fundamentally viewed it as a window of opportunity for learning. For many participants, it represented an opportunity for organizational learning; for some others, it also represented an opportunity to learn about the superintendency itself. In all cases, however, participants found themselves deliberately engaged in activities through which they sought to accrue perspectives that

would meaningfully inform their work as superintendents. At the same time, participants viewed the entry period as an opportunity for assimilation into their new organizations and organizational roles. Summarily, they regarded the entry period as pivotal, demanding, and ripe with opportunity.

In many ways, participants' shared conception of the entry period closely aligns with findings from other studies of superintendent entry. Gray (2005), for example, likewise found that incoming superintendents assigned great value and importance to the entry period and viewed successful entry as a pivotal factor in their overall success. Gray's findings were corroborated by Martinez-Perez (2005) and Roughton (2007), both of whom likewise found that incoming superintendents characterized the entry period as important, busy, and demanding. Findings from this study closely match those previous observations.

At the same time, however, one perspective about the entry period among participants in this study is unique. Previous studies of superintendent entry have defined the entry period as commencing upon the incoming superintendent's first official day of work in the position and extending for 90 to 120 days thereafter (Gray, 2005; Hernandez, 2005; Martinez-Perez, 2005; Roughton, 2007). Participants in this study, however, almost unanimously conceptualized the entry period as beginning upon their appointment to the position, not upon their first official day of work in the position. Further, while several participants created formal entry plans that organized specific activities for up to 90 days, they had no such arbitrary notions about the precise duration of the entry period itself. Participants' conception of the entry period's commencement and relative duration raises notable questions about the ways in which previous studies may have inadvertently

overlooked important dimensions of the entry experience by neglecting the period between appointment and arrival to the position.

***Prevalence of formal entry planning.*** In sharp contrast to previous research of superintendent entry, this study found extensive formal entry planning among participants. Gray (2005) found that very few incoming superintendents developed formal entry plans to guide their entry activities. Among Gray's participants, 76% described having strategies to facilitate a successful entry experience, but only 32% of those participants actually distilled those strategies to a formal entry plan. Gray's findings were corroborated by Martinez-Perez (2005) in her examination of entry experiences among incoming superintendents in rural, suburban, and urban school district settings within the state of California. Two years later, Roughton (2007) further corroborated those findings. Taken together, those three earlier studies suggest that incoming superintendents tend to think broadly about their entry experiences and only loosely identify some conceptual directions for their entry activities, seldom formalizing them in a written entry plan.

The findings of this study refute the conclusion suggested by research from Gray, Martinez-Perez, and Roughton. Quite contrary to their findings, participants in this study frequently engaged in formal entry planning in order to overtly guide their activities throughout the entry period. Of the 20 incoming superintendents participating in the study, 16 (80%) described the deliberate creation of formal entry plans. While two of those participants noted that formal entry plans were required by their school boards as part of the selection process, 14 attributed their decision to develop formal entry plans to their own belief that they were important to successful entry into the superintendency.



For many, those plans helped to maintain focus on their entry activities when the pressures of a rapid work tempo and the varied, unpredictable nature of their work threatened to distract them or otherwise disrupt their efforts. For some others, they provided a springboard off which to launch broader strategic planning initiatives for their school districts. For others still, they served to communicate their entry goals to internal and external stakeholders and to galvanize attention around their entry priorities.

Given the rational basis upon which those participants decided to engage in formal entry planning and the wide variety of participants included in the sample, it seems difficult to attribute the prevalence of formal entry planning to a simple statistical or sampling anomaly, even though those findings almost diametrically oppose the conclusions of previous research. Based on participants' accounts of their entry planning efforts, it seems more likely that incoming superintendents' recognition of the value of formal entry planning has improved in the five to seven years since those earlier studies were conducted, and that formal entry planning has, as a result, become more common as an element of practice. Given that both scholarly literature and publications aimed toward practitioners (Kerrings & Cushing, 2001; Neely, Berube, & Wilson, 2002) have recommended formal entry planning for a full decade now, it is reasonable to speculate that the recommendation has gained greater traction among incoming superintendents as a matter of professional practice. Further, some participants' narratives suggest that their veteran colleagues have also begun to specifically encourage the use of formal entry plans, lending credibility to the recommendation and greater momentum to the practice. While additional research is necessary to corroborate the findings of this study and to substantiate this discussion, this finding at least begins to suggest that the

recommendation for formal entry planning has been translated into the domain of professional practice. In that sense, this study effectively updates the current knowledge base with new perspectives on the prevalence of formal entry planning among incoming superintendents.

**Research question 2: Challenges.** This study also sought to describe the challenges that incoming superintendents associate with entry into the position. As in the case of entry planning, some findings corroborate or clarify conclusions from earlier research, while other findings contribute altogether new knowledge about the topic. Further, observations about how participants conceptualized and experienced challenges during entry raise important questions about the conceptual framework that organically emerges from the broader body of leadership succession research produced over the past several decades. The following sections explore each of those topics more closely.

***Variety and scope.*** Participants described a substantial variety of challenges during entry that range from the purely occupational to the deeply personal. At once, they worked to mediate functional challenges like time management, organizational challenges like initiating and advancing change efforts, operational challenges like budget reductions and personnel administration, and personal challenges like family dislocation, sacrifice, and loss.

The variety and scope of challenges identified by participants is largely consistent with the very limited number of previous studies that have also explored superintendent entry. Certainly, the current findings support previous research that has illustrated how the sheer complexity of the superintendent's work presents its own set of challenges (Glass & Franceschini, 2007; Kowalski et al, 2011; Nestor-Baker & Hoy, 2001). At the

same time, they corroborate previous observations that issues of school finance and personnel administration create pressing challenges for incoming superintendents (Trevino et al., 2008). Further, they complement those studies by offering a more diverse and complete catalog of challenges and corroborate, for the first time, Orr's (2006) effort to comprehensively delineate challenges facing incoming superintendents during entry. This study extends on Orr's previous work, however, by going beyond the identification of challenges to fully describe their rich, nuanced complexity through the voices and lived experiences of participants. In that sense, this study makes a meaningful contribution to current understanding of the superintendent entry phenomenon and of the underlying nature of challenges incoming superintendents experience as they step into that role.

Perhaps most importantly, however, the phenomenological design of this study enabled an altogether new kind of understanding. Beyond creating or validating a simple list of challenges, this study illustrates the powerful force of context on incoming superintendents' conception and understanding of challenges they experienced. That point is further explored in the next section.

***Context as an experiential lens.*** While the challenges identified by participants may be categorically grouped around topical themes, their narratives illustrate an important truth that brings new depth of understanding to their experiences: context powerfully shapes the nature and manifestation of those varied types of challenges, as well as the ways in which incoming superintendents conceptualize and experience them. For that reason, the phenomenological design of this study brings new perspective to the study of superintendent entry. Specifically, this study demonstrates how the reduction of

those challenges to a simple list dramatically underestimates their variety and complexity as lived experiences. To observe, for example, that incoming superintendents commonly struggle with issues of school finance substantially underestimates the extent to which their specific experiences vary as a function of context and, as a result, somewhat misrepresents the issue through implicit over-generalization. Participants in this study experienced financial challenges in myriad ways. Some struggled with immediate budget reductions, while others struggled with the cumulative effects of prolonged economic deterioration. Some struggled with substantial employee layoffs as the byproduct of financial hardships, while others struggled with inadequate local capacity to support much needed capital development. Some struggled with the unpredictable nature of federal funding, while others struggled to implement unfunded mandates from state and federal agencies. Summarily, to say simply that they experienced financial challenges oversimplifies the variety and substance of their experiences to the point that it misses the most meaningful dimensions of their experiences.

***The superintendency and personal sacrifice.*** Beyond corroborating several findings from previous research about challenges facing incoming superintendents, this study also contributes important new knowledge about the topic. Specifically, it documents for the first time the substantial personal costs that incoming superintendents associate with their professional roles. Those personal costs were very common among participants, 70% of whom identified them during their interviews. Those personal costs were also substantial. Participants described risks to their physical health, emotional and psychological harm, threats to family relationships, the loss of personal identity and a sense of personal privacy, grief and regret, and other personal sacrifices. Both the

prevalence and substance of those personal costs raise meaningful new questions about the superintendency and personal sacrifice that should be the focus of future research.

Beyond the specifics of those personal costs, it is also troubling that participants lacked mechanisms for their mediation. It is even more troubling that, in the absence of such strategies, some participants implicitly acquiesced to those personal sacrifices, accepting them simply and regretfully as the inevitable opportunity costs of their work. Their narratives offer partial, but not complete, perspectives about the underlying dynamics leading to their acquiescence. The silent acquiescence of some participants – especially novice incoming superintendents – was driven by a desire to maintain what they considered to be an illusion of perfection held by their school boards. Whether their employing school boards actually held this perception or not, these participants believed that their boards had, by selecting them to fill the position, placed them on a sort of pedestal and regarded them, albeit unrealistically, with a sense of perfection. Rather than risk shattering that perception and disappointing their school boards, they simply submitted quietly to significant personal sacrifices.

For other participants, simple neglect led to unintended personal sacrifices. This pattern was likewise especially evident among novice incoming superintendents, who became so wholly absorbed in the exigent demands of their work and its unrelenting tempo that they lost sight of other, personal priorities until it was too late to mitigate against related damage.

Interestingly, veteran incoming superintendents were less prone to personal sacrifices as a result of impression management or neglect, at least suggesting the possibility that a developmental maturation of perspective may accrue through longevity

of experience in the role. Nevertheless, like their novice counterparts, veteran incoming superintendents described substantial personal sacrifices. Theirs, however, were commonly triggered by an overwhelming sense of stewardship and service. They so deeply conceptualized their work as an act of stewardship and service that they approached it with a sense of self-sacrificing altruism, setting aside their own well-being in favor of their service to the role and its attendant responsibilities.

Though it falls outside the scope of this study to provide a resolution, these observations raise questions about the possible relationship between personal costs incoming superintendents associate with the role and the high rate of turnover in the superintendency evident across the nation. Speculatively, it seems possible that incoming superintendents' willingness to accept those personal costs could be attached to a particular time period – perhaps especially the entry period itself – and that they find those mounting personal costs less acceptable as their longevity in a given position increases. Should that be true, then it seems plausible that superintendents may reach a point at which those personal costs outweigh other factors and become unacceptable, at which time they may seek to overcome them, to restore balance, by leaving their current positions to seek other superintendent positions elsewhere. Findings from the study suggest, however, that those personal costs are likely not the function of a particular position or specific context, but are instead a function of the construct of the superintendency itself, making their ultimate resolution through relocation unlikely.

Admittedly, the extent to which those personal sacrifices emerged in this study was unanticipated. Previous literature offers little, if any, indication that they play any

role in the superintendent entry phenomenon, let alone such a powerful one. This new perspective is, for that reason, perhaps the most important one to emerge from the study.

***Student achievement.*** The relative infrequency with which participants identified challenges associated with student achievement is likewise striking and somewhat unanticipated. Only 35% of participants described challenges corresponding to student achievement, which seems unusual given increased pressure for demonstrable improvements in student performance, heightened state and federal accountability expectations, and greater attention to standardized test scores in recent years (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2008; Glass & Franceschini, 2007; Kowalski et al., 2011). Notably, those participants who described challenges associated with student achievement attributed them either to uncommonly high levels of student diversity in their school districts or to patterns of low student performance that had persisted in their new school districts for long periods of time before their arrival. Though it seems likely that they might do so in an era of intense accountability and public scrutiny of standardized test results, participants did not more broadly describe generalized challenges associated with raising student performance.

Ironically, it may be that same ubiquitous accountability pressure that led some participants to largely deemphasize concerns over testing, curriculum, and student achievement in their characterization of the challenges facing them. At one level, they may have so well anticipated those challenges and prepared for them prior to their entry into the superintendency that they seemed inherently more manageable and contained, commanding less of their time, energy, effort, and concern than other challenges that were more unexpected. At another level, they may conceptualize challenges associated

with student achievement as difficulties they share with others in the school organization. That is, they may feel less personal pressure to meet those challenges because they share responsibility for meeting them with many others in the school organization. Unlike some other challenges for which they feel personally, directly responsible as a result of their unique organizational roles, they share responsibility for meeting student achievement challenges with district leaders, principals, teachers, and other instructional personnel throughout their school organizations. As such, they may tend to conceptualize student achievement as a challenge broadly facing public education and all its constituent members instead of a challenge specifically associated with the superintendency itself. Such a theory seems plausible given participants' almost universal expression of commitment to ensuring that their school districts serve students with diligence and care.

**Research question 3: Variation among participants.** This study also sought to identify the extent to which participants' experiential challenges may vary based upon personal characteristics like gender, race/ethnicity, and age band, and upon organizational features like locale and point of entry into the superintendency. Findings about the varied prevalence of experiential challenges across those variables were qualified by three caveats. First, the percentage rates reported in the presentation of findings tend to obscure very small participant counts in a few demographic categories and may on their surface overemphasize related variations. Second, the statistics reported in the findings are purely descriptive, and their accompanying discussions intended to describe noteworthy variations but not to imply statistical significance. Third, those results were not intended to assert causal relationships between participants' demographic characteristics and the challenges they experienced. Even with those caveats, however,



several noteworthy variations warrant further discussion, especially within the categories of gender, locale, and point of entry.

While notable variations were evident within the categories of race/ethnicity and age band, careful consideration of participants' narratives suggests that the demographic variables themselves were not particularly influential upon the specific manifestation of challenges they experienced or described. That is, variations within those categories appear to be only coincidentally associated with the variables themselves. Other factors like contextual features of the school district or the superintendent's unique role in the school organization appear to exert much greater influence upon the manifestation of challenges than do the variables of race/ethnicity or age band. Additionally, participants from traditionally under-represented populations in the superintendency were not disproportionately prevalent in school districts where specific challenges were especially likely to occur.

***Gender.*** It is striking that male participants described personal costs associated with the superintendency at twice the rate of female participants. Previous research by Van Tuyle and Watkins (2009) that found particularized challenges associated with family responsibilities, gender discrimination, and lowered self-esteem among female superintendents makes it difficult to reconcile the notable disparity evident in the current data. On the surface, it may appear that female participants in this study experienced fewer personal costs upon their entry into the superintendency because they had greater success at achieving a sense of “balance” between their personal and professional lives. However, participants' narratives do not support that premise. In fact, neither male nor female participants cited any specific strategies for mediating the personal costs they

associated with their professional roles. Likewise, neither group described specific mechanisms for achieving the sense of healthy “balance” to which they aspired. Absent data upon which to substantiate a theory to explain that discrepancy in prevalence, the need for further research in this area is evident. That need is more fully described later in this chapter.

Male participants cited challenges associated with role relationships twice as frequently as their female counterparts. However, the use of communication and collaboration, which may arguably prove most effective as strategies for mediating those challenges, was not less prevalent among male participants than female participants. Reliance on those strategies was comparable between gender groups, so the experiential variation between them cannot be explained simply as a function of the frequency with which they engaged in communication and collaboration activities. Previous research may be instructive on this point. Specifically, Eagly and Johnson's (2009) meta-analysis of gender and leadership style suggests that male leaders tend to demonstrate a more autocratic and directive leadership style than their female counterparts, who themselves tend to demonstrate a more democratic and participative style. To the extent that democratic and participative leadership is naturally inclusive, invitational, and non-hierarchical, female incoming superintendents may lead in ways that organically nurture more harmonious role relationships than their male counterparts, who tend to lean toward directive, hierarchical leadership that more rigidly defines and enforces role relationships and may create greater levels of friction with colleagues in positions of unequal organizational power and status. In that sense, leadership styles more common among female leaders may influence *the manner in which* they communicate and collaborate in

ways that better cultivate effective role relationships. Despite previous findings that female superintendents experience particularized challenges around gender discrimination, gender stereotypes, and sex-role norms (Dana, 2009; Van Tuyle & Watkins, 2009), their underlying dispositions toward leadership activities may ultimately enhance the efficacy of certain mediating strategies utilized by both genders.

It is also striking that female participants identified challenges associated with a sense of isolation and with personnel administration three times more frequently than their male counterparts. Female participants' disparate sense of isolation may, at least to some extent, be connected to their underrepresentation in the superintendency. Current statistics indicate that, while the rate has grown steadily over the last 30 years, only 24% of the nation's superintendents are female (Kowalski et al., 2011). They have even fewer peers than their male counterparts with whom they can establish networks of support to help ameliorate the sense of isolation that often accompanies the superintendent's unique organizational role. Ironically, the same leadership tendencies that may help female leaders to prevent or ameliorate challenges associated with role relationships may simultaneously exacerbate challenges associated with personnel administration and help to explain the disparate frequency with which they reported those challenges in this study. While democratic, participative leadership may naturally strengthen role relationships, it may simultaneously trigger or exacerbate challenges associated with personnel administration, which, by virtue of its rigid framework of related law and policy, naturally lends itself toward a more autocratic, directive leadership style seemingly favored by male leaders.

***Locale.*** Previous research has suggested that locale may influence the types of challenges experienced by incoming superintendents. Lamkin (2006), for example, found that superintendents in rural settings uniquely experienced challenges associated with inadequate training and professional preparation necessary to execute specific job duties, especially within the domains of law, finance, personnel, government relations, and established board policies. She also observed that superintendents in rural settings experienced specific environmental challenges associated with rural communities and that they often assumed disparate professional duties beyond those traditionally associated with the superintendent's role.

Findings from the current study do not fully corroborate Lamkin's conclusions. Consistent with her findings, challenges associated with personnel administration progressively increased among participants in this study as their locales became more rural. However, findings do not support her conclusions with regard to law, finance, government relations, or established board policies. Perhaps due to poor economic conditions currently affecting the entire nation, challenges associated with school finance were one of the three most common among participants in all locales. Further, challenges associated with government relations, which fell within the experiential category of political challenges in the current study, were not more prevalent among participants in rural locales even when considered separately from their broader experiential category. No participants in any locale identified challenges associated with board policies.

Research from the Council of the Great City Schools (2005) found that superintendents in urban settings uniquely experienced challenges associated with politics and media relations. Superintendents in urban settings were also found to

frequently experience challenges associated with student achievement given the substantially greater student diversity evident in their schools. Each of those findings is supported by data from the current study, where participants cited political challenges and challenges associated with the media with increasing frequency as their locales became more urban. In fact, 100% of participants in suburban and urban settings cited challenges in both categories. Further, 50% participants in urban settings cited challenges associated with student achievement – a greater frequency than in any other locale – and narratively linked those challenges to the diversity of backgrounds and needs among students.

It is important to emphasize that data from this study do not imply that the challenges facing incoming superintendents in urban settings are either more abundant or more difficult to mediate than the challenges facing incoming superintendents in rural settings. Rather, the data suggest that the nature and context of the urban locale appears to more substantially influence the specific types of challenges facing incoming superintendents than does the nature and context of the rural locale.

***Point of entry.*** Previous research has raised questions about how point of entry into the superintendency may influence the variety and types of challenges facing incoming superintendents (Sutton, 2010). For that reason, point of entry was identified as an organizational variable for the third research question presented in this study. Its findings suggest that point of entry may, in fact, influence some challenges facing incoming superintendents. Internal entrants to the superintendency identified challenges associated with role relationships more than twice as frequently as external entrants. Participants' narratives help to explain the nature of that variation. Internal entrants had previously established relationships with their colleagues while serving in other

organizational roles. In those other roles, they were either equal or subordinate to their colleagues within the organizational hierarchy. Upon entry to the superintendency, they gained new positional power and supervisory responsibility over their colleagues and were therefore compelled to re-negotiate those role relationships. That re-negotiation triggered friction that manifested as a challenge associated with role relationships. External entrants were forced to undertake no such re-negotiation of preexisting role relationships, freeing them from its associated friction. Consequently, internal entrants may tend to experience challenges associated with role relationships in unique ways as a direct byproduct of their point of entry.

Most notably, external entrants to the superintendency identified challenges associated with organizational change more than four times as frequently as internal entrants. In doing so, they described widespread resistance to their change efforts both within and outside their school organizations. While, unlike the case of role relationships, their narratives do not suggest an explanation for that variation, it seems intuitively reasonable to suspect that their relative novelty as leadership figures within their school organizations was a factor. Unlike internal entrants to the position, they enjoyed no benefit of immediate credibility as leadership figures. Internal entrants enjoyed the benefits of established reputations and relationships that they could conveniently leverage as they initiate organizational change efforts, while external entrants did not. Hypothetically, external entrants must first build credibility, reputations, and relationships before initiating successful organizational change, putting them at a relative disadvantage in comparison to their internal counterparts.

**Research question 4: Mediating strategies.** This study also sought to identify strategies incoming superintendents used to mediate challenges they experienced during entry into the position. The paucity of literature examining that question largely drove its inclusion. Vergudo (2005) found that incoming superintendents often relied on previous professional experience in the absence of specific training and preparation for entry, while Sovine (2009) found that incoming superintendents leveraged communication, mentors, vision, and professional networking as mediating strategies. Absent those two contributions, previous literature is largely silent on the question of incoming superintendents' mediating efforts. Findings from this study not only corroborate Sovine's (2009) conclusions, but also provide a more complete and descriptive catalog that features a variety of additional techniques. More broadly, however, participants' narratives offer notable perspectives about the roles of context and creativity as they worked to mediate experiential challenges. They also reveal insights into the roles of communication and collaboration for incoming superintendents. The following sections explore each of those issues more closely.

***Context and creativity.*** Given the limited literature available, it seems reasonable to speculate that incoming superintendents enter the position with a broad array of mediating strategies, or accumulate them throughout the entry period, and apply them in almost one-to-one correspondence to the challenges they experience. In such a model, incoming superintendents would apply one set of mediating strategies to financial challenges, another set to political challenges, another set to challenges associated with the local community, and, in similar fashion, match discrete strategies to other particularized challenges. Findings from this study, however, suggest that incoming

superintendents employ an altogether different approach to challenge mediation. Rather than possessing a large tool kit of discrete strategies and applying them selectively to specific types of challenges, participants largely applied two dominant strategies – communication and collaboration – in novel ways that matched the specific context of challenges across the spectrum of experiential categories. In that sense, communication and collaboration might be best described as multi-purpose tools of universal utility.

Participants' specific examples illustrate the universal utility of communication and collaboration. Some leveraged them to overcome challenges associated with role relationships by communicating expectations to colleagues or by collaborating to foster mutuality. Others used them to mediate challenges associated with their school boards by developing customized communication patterns with individual board members. Others still used them to develop organizational capacity by creating opportunities for communication and collaboration with colleagues and community partners. Taken on the whole, communication and collaboration were kaleidoscopic: they shifted and turned in unique and novel ways as participants creatively applied them to match the specific features and contexts of different challenges they encountered. In that sense, problem-solving among participants was much less a *mechanical act* of matching a discrete strategy to an emergent challenge than it was a *creative process* whereby they adapted communication and collaboration to suit the presentations and contexts of challenges.

***Communication, collaboration, and the superintendency.*** Their dominance in practice among participants suggests a broader observation about communication, collaboration, and the superintendency. In their discussion of the superintendent's evolving role since the mid-1800s, Kowalski et al. (2011) drew on the contributions of



Drucker and others to advance the point that, despite their other evolving roles, superintendents have always been communicators. They argued that superintendents' communication has necessarily shifted to match the evolving roles conceived for them over time, but that, at their core, they have always held the role of communicator. In its earliest form, they argued, communication served to define and inform. In others, it has served to maximize administrative control and legitimize formal authority, or advance improvement efforts supported by empirical social science research. Most recently, they argued, it has served to empower constituents and build internal capacity.

Findings from this study suggest what may be the next iteration in the evolution they described, one where communication (and collaboration as its conceptual twin) serves to mediate challenges facing the school organization and the broader community it serves. In that conception, the superintendent-as-communicator is responsible for diagnosing challenges, developing a conceptual understanding of those challenges, and then creatively leveraging communication and collaboration to facilitate their resolution. Such a theoretical construct would certainly explain why participants universally applied and valued those two mediating strategies and, further, seems consistent with the centrality they held in participants' shared estimation of their work.

**Research question 5: Effectiveness.** Finally, this study sought to examine the value that incoming superintendents assign to their mediating strategies in an effort to identify and communicate the most effective practices. Participants commonly assigned great value to their mediating strategies. It is especially notable that they substantially emphasized the value of formal entry planning given that previous studies (Gray, 2005; Martinez-Perez, 2005; Roughton, 2007) found only very limited formal entry planning

among incoming superintendents. This study not only found a much greater frequency of formal entry planning, but also that the activity itself appears to be very effective for incoming superintendents as they negotiate the entry period. Further, participants' narratives suggest that the value of those plans is a direct function of their sophistication: as their sophistication grows, so too does their value. Those observations raise implications for professional practice that are more fully discussed later in this chapter.

Like Sovine's (2009) research, this study likewise found that incoming superintendents leverage communication, mentors, vision, and professional networking as mediating strategies. The accounts of participants in the current study suggest, however, that communication is substantially more potent, ubiquitous, and effective than the use of mentors, vision, or professional networking. Participants emphasized that communication with internal and external stakeholders served multiple functions, often simultaneously. At once, it served to share information, establish expectations, engender mutuality, resolve conflicts, and symbolize leadership style. Perhaps due to that multifaceted utility, participants assigned great value to it. They commonly emphasized, however, that it was only effective as a mediating strategy when it was both genuine and sustained over time, a perspective that clarifies findings from Sovine's earlier research.

It is also important to note that, while participants commonly assigned great value to their mediating strategies, they could not appraise the effectiveness of strategies for mediating substantial personal costs they frequently associated with entry into the superintendency because they could cite no such strategies. By implication of their acquiescence to those personal sacrifices as an unavoidable opportunity cost of their

professional role, they were largely unsuccessful at mediating them, a point that both informs the direction of future research and raises implications for professional practice.

### **Implications for Practice**

Findings from this study suggest a variety of practical implications for incoming superintendents, school boards, and universities and professional organizations that may improve the quality of incoming superintendents' entry experiences and, ultimately, their success and longevity in the position. This section describes those implications.

**Incoming superintendents.** Findings from this study raise several implications for practice among incoming superintendents that may improve the quality of their entry experiences, including:

1. Participants particularly emphasized the value of formal entry plans throughout their entry into the superintendency. Findings from the study also suggest that the value of those plans increases as they become more sophisticated and rigorous. Therefore, incoming superintendents are likely to maximize the value of their formal entry plans by carefully articulating specific, rigorous, comprehensive efforts and activities. Strategies that specify mechanisms for learning about their professional roles and their school organizations, identifying key internal and external stakeholders, initiating and cultivating effective working relationships, and diagnosing organizational needs may be particularly beneficial. Incoming superintendents may also benefit from broadly communicating their entry plans, thereby promoting the transparency of their efforts and engendering support among diverse audiences, including school boards, colleagues, and communities.

Deliberately and consistently relying on those plans to steer their efforts is likely to aid incoming superintendents as they negotiate entry.

2. As incoming superintendents conceptualize entry strategies and distill them into formal entry plans, prioritizing communication and collaboration are likely to help them establish an interactive, participative leadership style that they may broadly leverage to overcome emerging challenges as they progress through the entry period. Establishing appropriate structures and routines for effective communication and collaboration from the earliest days of the entry period should help to equip incoming superintendents with the necessary mechanisms to mitigate or resolve a variety of organizational and occupational problems they may face in the future.
3. Incoming superintendents are also likely to benefit from considering the breadth and depth of personal costs participants in this study associated with their own work in the position. Further, efforts to move beyond abstract conceptions of “balance” and toward specific steps through which they may ensure their emotional, psychological, and physical well-being may prove advantageous in the face of substantial opportunity costs participants attached to the role . Such steps could include defining boundaries to protect their own personal priorities, discussing them with their school boards, and identifying activities to enforce and safeguard them. While the specific nature of those activities is likely to vary considerably among incoming superintendents, the findings of this study suggest that carving out specific time for their families, defining non-negotiable expectations for relocation, placing limits on their

work schedules that ensure opportunities for relaxation and rejuvenation, and attending to their physical well-being through regular health care and exercise may be especially valuable to incoming superintendents.

4. Participants clearly expressed almost overwhelming demands on their time, attention, and energy that accompany the superintendency. Those demands seem inevitable. Therefore, incoming superintendents, especially novice ones, are encouraged to realistically anticipate the relentless tempo they will experience in their work and deliberately plan for it. Developing specific processes and strategies for managing an abundant and diverse catalog of work that is unlikely to subside with experience in the role may prove useful as they adjust to the demanding tempo and variety of their work. Those processes and strategies might reasonably include identifying office personnel who can assist with the organization of their work calendars, setting aside specific time each day to manage unexpected issues and incidents, delegating routine tasks to subordinates in order to create additional work time for themselves during the business day, and creating and protecting regular routines for attending to priorities. Incoming superintendents are also encouraged to consider working to establish realistic boundaries that ensure opportunities to set aside their work and attend to their personal needs and interests.
5. Participants' concern about financial challenges they associated with their work were only partly about the immediate difficulties they faced. To a greater extent, they attributed the real difficulty of those financial challenges

to their prolonged duration. That is to say, the long-term, cumulative effects of financial hardships represented a challenge much greater than immediate, short-term financial planning and management. Incoming superintendents may, therefore, benefit from the development of a long-term vision for financial planning and of specific mechanisms to ensure the long-term financial viability of their school organizations. While they cannot reasonably turn their attention away from short-term financial exigencies, contemplating the broader, long-term financial landscape of their school organizations and planning strategically for those conditions may help incoming superintendents to lead their school districts through particularly difficult and prolonged economic hardships.

6. The relationship that exists between the superintendent and school board is unique, complex, and often disorienting for incoming superintendents. Findings from this study suggest that the development and maintenance of effective relationships between the superintendent and school board require the investment of significant thought, time, and energy. Toward that end, incoming superintendents might consider purposefully creating opportunities to engage in open dialogue with school boards and their constituent members about their individual and collective expectations. They may also seek out and leverage opportunities to unify school boards around important organizational priorities and work in order to minimize the isolated interests of individual school board members. Finally, they should consider leveraging the influence of their school board attorneys to moderate and referee friction,

adversity, and dysfunction within their school boards in order to minimize the difficult duplicity of their own role relationships with them.

7. A striking number of participants explained how problems originating within their local communities intersected their school organizations and how activities of their school organizations created friction within their communities. Developing early, informed perspectives about their local communities, and about the bi-directional relationship between their school organizations and communities, may help incoming superintendents to anticipate and minimize related friction. Toward that end, they may benefit from selectively finding or creating opportunities for direct involvement in community organizations, for appraising community interests and expectations, for direct communication with community stakeholders regarding district initiatives and activities, and for creating strong partnerships between their school organizations and local community stakeholders.

**School boards.** Arguably, no individual or group holds greater influence over the success, longevity, and well-being of incoming superintendents than their school boards.

Therefore, several implications exist for those governing bodies:

1. Participants' experiences suggest that school boards may help to facilitate the successful entry of incoming superintendents by creating clear expectations for formal entry planning and actively supporting those efforts. Since entry planning substantially concerns organizational learning, school boards can contribute meaningfully to incoming superintendents' planning efforts by preparing and presenting detailed profiles of their school districts that include

financial information, current and historical performance data, staffing plans and organizational charts, detailed perspectives about the local community, the identities of key internal and external stakeholders, media contacts, and instructive descriptions of organizational strengths, deficits, and emergent challenges. By providing those profiles during the selection process, school boards may empower incoming superintendents to begin the formulation of well-informed entry plans immediately upon their selection for appointment to the position.

2. Recognizing that many incoming superintendents, especially novice ones, struggle with issues of multiplicity as they relate to their employing school boards, school boards themselves may help to minimize that challenge by adopting a proactive stance toward creating and sustaining effective role relationships with them. School boards' efforts to minimize disruption and disorientation created by disparity among their individual members – such as defining collective expectations for the work, communication, and priorities of incoming superintendents – may prove especially beneficial to incoming superintendents. Further, school boards may support the incoming superintendent's effective role assimilation by creating and maintaining cohesion within their own ranks. Put another way, school boards themselves may support incoming superintendents by engaging in their own strategic planning aimed at defining a unified vision for the superintendency itself.
3. The personal costs some participants associated with their professional role were attributable to the pressure they felt to please – or at least not to



disappoint – their employing school boards. That is, several participants acquiesced to significant personal sacrifices to avoid friction with or disappointment among school board members. It is important that school boards recognize this dynamic and consider it carefully as they define and express their expectations for incoming superintendents. Creating reasonable expectations and supportive environments for superintendents that recognize their humanity, acknowledge and respect their personal conditions and circumstances, and create safe conditions for them to attend to their personal lives are powerful measures that school boards may undertake as they support and sustain their incoming superintendents. Absent such a proactive approach, school boards are likely to encounter eventual poor performance and burnout among incoming superintendents, further exacerbating the problem of superintendent attrition and turnover so well documented in existing literature.

**Universities and professional organizations.** By virtue of their orientation toward service and development, universities and professional organizations are uniquely poised to support the successful entry of incoming superintendents. Therefore, several implications also exist for those groups, including:

1. Within their preparation programs, universities may proactively help aspiring superintendents to improve their future entry experiences by advocating for the development and use of formal entry plans. Perhaps even more importantly, by providing concrete illustrative models of effective entry plans, universities may equip aspiring superintendents with the organizational tools

they need to approach entry into the superintendency with purpose, structure, and direction.

2. Only a limited number of participants described the use of a compelling vision for education as a mediating strategy. Those who did, however, emphasized that it was useful at both a personal and organizational level. Universities may increase its prevalence of use by helping aspiring superintendents to develop and articulate a personal vision for their work and for education as a social enterprise. As they do, it seems especially important for universities to emphasize to aspiring superintendents that the activity is not a purely academic endeavor, but that it also has direct utility in the superintendency.
3. The phenomenological design of this study revealed the nuanced complexity of challenges facing incoming superintendents. While 17 discrete categories of experiential challenges were distilled from participants' interviews, there exists within those categories a great variety of manifestations informed by context. Intersections between some categories of experience are also evident. Despite their previous professional and preparatory experiences, many participants explained that they felt unprepared or under-prepared for the realities of the superintendency until experiencing them first-hand upon their entry into the role. In order to respond creatively and effectively to the challenges they experience, incoming superintendents must first deeply and fully understand their nature and implications. Universities may help to equip incoming superintendents with the critical intellectual skills of perception, diagnosis, analysis, and evaluation necessary to achieve that depth of

understanding by emphasizing the development of those capacities in their preparatory programs. By embedding activities and experiences that cultivate complex problem-solving skills within their curricula and courses, universities may help aspiring superintendents to acquire the dispositions and abilities needed to construct knowledge from their experiences, interpret and fully understand challenges they encounter, and approach their resolution with insight. In so doing, universities may also help aspiring superintendents to achieve a sense of readiness for the realities of role.

4. Beyond offering preparatory programs of study, universities might also consider working to identify and provide in-service support for incoming superintendents throughout the entry period. Because they enjoy a robust collection of talent and resources, universities are poised to offer highly valuable services to incoming superintendents. For example, they may help them to define specific components of their entry plans, develop organizational assessments and environmental scans, initiate and support organizational change efforts, and conduct methodologically sound program evaluations. By extending their efforts and services into the entry period itself, universities may substantially support incoming superintendents beyond their enrollment in specific academic programs and improve their transition into the role.
5. While fewer than half of the participants in this study described seeking professional counsel from others, those who did found it very helpful as they worked to overcome challenges. Professional organizations may consider

expanding the provision of mentoring services to incoming superintendents and increasing the availability and quality of professional networking opportunities available to them. The creation of mentoring and networking opportunities across state lines seems especially promising insofar as it may minimize incoming superintendents' resistance to exposing their own vulnerabilities or perceived weaknesses to nearby colleagues. By connecting incoming superintendents with retired and practicing veterans to the role, professional organizations may help them to overcome a sense of isolation and equip them with avenues for seeking and acquiring feedback and counsel from peer colleagues who possess the experiential expertise to support them effectively.

6. Professional organizations are also in a unique position to advocate for effective working conditions for incoming superintendents. By leveraging their influence and expertise to lobby school boards, government agencies, and other influential groups on behalf of incoming superintendents, they may help to improve systemic support for the work of incoming superintendents throughout the entry period. Such systemic support may include professional services, mentoring, conflict resolution services, relocation support, and other efforts to improve the transition and assimilation of incoming superintendents.

### **Strengths and Limitations of the Study**

It is appropriate to acknowledge strengths of this study in order to highlight the ways in which it meaningfully contributes to the body of existing knowledge about

leadership succession in the superintendency (Creswell, 2008). Noteworthy strengths of the study include:

1. The study meaningfully targeted a problematic gap in existing research, which has traditionally conceptualized leadership succession as a principally organizational phenomenon and has, consequently, largely neglected the lived experiences of incoming superintendents as a personal, experiential phenomenon. By exploring and describing the lived experiences of incoming superintendents, this study complements the existing knowledge base with new perspectives about the very human dimension of superintendent entry.
2. The use of a phenomenological research design captured the essence of participants' experiences during entry into the superintendency and supported the description of their rich personal stories through their own voices. As a result, the findings illustrate and express the nuanced complexity of participants' experiences and provide a robust characterization of the phenomenon in deeply instructive ways that other research designs would not.
3. The study achieved a purposeful sample that appropriately reflected the national distribution of superintendents across five demographic and organizational variables, at least partially overcoming an observed limitation in previous research that has relied on very small samples situated in particularized settings. Additionally, the 20 incoming superintendents participating in the study contributed a great variety of perspectives and experiences that supported a robust description of the central phenomenon. The study also includes a description of participants' professional backgrounds

and organizational features to inform transferability of findings to an appropriate population of incoming superintendents.

4. Throughout the design and execution of the study, sound methodological decisions grounded in established standards and practices for phenomenological research promoted rigor, quality, transparency, and trustworthiness. Most notably, purposeful sampling, effective participant identification and recruitment procedures, careful and obvious attention to informed consent and participant protection, the consistent use of a pilot-tested interview protocol throughout data collection, effective interview techniques that promoted honest and descriptive dialogue with participants, iterative data analysis procedures, and the grounding of findings in the actual voices of participants ensured quality and promoted trustworthiness at each stage of study design and execution.
5. At one level, the study is important because it corroborates some findings from previous research, enriching specific aspects of the existing knowledge base by confirming observations from other studies. For example, several findings from this study confirm Orr's (2006) delineation of challenges faced by superintendents during the entry period. Likewise, it confirms findings from Shaps (2009), Gray (2005), Martinez-Perez (2005), and Roughton (2007) with regard to the importance incoming superintendents assign to the entry period. It also confirms Sovine's (2009) conclusion that incoming superintendents often struggle with issues of school finance, time management, student achievement, and public relations and that they often

leverage communication, mentors, vision, and professional networking to mitigate those challenges. It also advances Sutton's (2010) observation that point of entry into the superintendency may notably influence challenges. To the extent that it corroborates and informs previous research findings, this study validates the existing knowledge base and supports its more confident application to the arena of professional practice.

6. At another level, the study is important because it contributes altogether new observations to the existing knowledge base. Notably, this study found a substantially greater prevalence of formal entry planning among incoming superintendents than previous studies have documented and therefore offers a sharp counterpoint to current understanding of that aspect of the topic. Equally important, this study documented quantifiable variations in experiential challenges among participants across different personal and organizational variables for the first time, thereby contributing an important new perspective to the scholarly community. Perhaps most importantly, this study documented the profound personal costs incoming superintendents associate with their professional role and provided a rich description of those costs for the first time.

It is also important to disclose limitations of the study in order to inform judgments about transferability of results and recommendations for future research (Creswell, 2008). Notable limitations of the study include:

1. The third research question asked, "Are there variations in those challenges based on the personal characteristics of incoming superintendents and the

features of their organizations?” As such, this study sought only to ascertain whether or not variations existed and to delineate their existence across established variables, not to explore or explain the reason for their existence. While it successfully answered the research question as posed, and while noteworthy variations were observed across multiple variables, additional research is necessary to corroborate those findings, explore the nature of those variations, and undertake a sound explanation for their existence.

2. While the sample for this study broadly reflected several important characteristics of the national population of superintendents, small participant counts in some demographic categories limit perspectives unique to those groups. For example, four of 13 participant categories (Non-white, Age 45 or younger, Age 60 or older, and Suburb) were represented by fewer than five participants. Therefore, readers should exercise caution not to over-generalize about findings unique to those categories.
3. Additionally, while the sample for this study included participants from multiple states and achieved broad demographic representation, participants were exclusively sampled from southeastern states that characteristically differ from some other states elsewhere in the nation. States represented in the study, for example, lack employee unions with collective bargaining arrangements. They also tend to fall in the lowest tier of states across the nation with regard to educational expenditures and student achievement. Additionally, their structures for the organization and governance of public schools vary substantially from some found elsewhere across the nation.



Characteristics of the state settings from which the sample was drawn, therefore, potentially introduce limits to transferability of the findings that readers should consider.

4. This study sought to conceptualize and describe challenges incoming superintendents associate with their entry into the position. A significant portion of its findings, therefore, naturally examined the nature, scope, and prevalence of those challenges. While the result is a rich, robust treatment of that aspect of the research purpose, that extensive treatment could unintentionally create the impression among readers that the entry period represents an altogether difficult, negative, or unrewarding experience for incoming superintendents. Such an impression would be unfair and inappropriate. While entry is unquestionably characterized by an array of intense and complex challenges, many participants expressed an abiding sense of satisfaction with the superintendency even though they found it to be remarkably challenging and difficult, especially because they believed so strongly in their stewardship of the public trust and leadership of organizations importantly engaged in the education of children. Readers should, therefore, contemplate the results of this study within the specific context of its research purpose and related questions.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Because the body of research specifically examining the personal experiential dimension of leadership succession in the superintendency remains underdeveloped in

comparison to other branches of the topic, the need for continued study is great. This study implicates the need for additional research around five specific areas:

1. Participants in this study almost universally conceived of the entry period as beginning with their appointment to the superintendency, not upon their first official day of work in the position. Because previous superintendent entry studies have attached the onset of entry to the incoming superintendent's first day of work in the position, they may have inadvertently overlooked important dimensions of the entry experience that occurred between appointment and arrival. Likewise, previous studies have artificially constrained the entry period to a duration of 90 to 120 days, a constraint that is not supported by the perspectives of participants in the current study. Future studies should therefore safeguard against this potential limitation by reconceptualizing both the onset and duration of the entry period.
2. This study found a much greater prevalence of formal entry planning among incoming superintendents than studies from five to seven years ago. Further research is necessary to corroborate that finding, especially since it so sharply contradicts earlier results. Should that research support the finding of this study, then additional research should investigate the reasons for this recent increase in the use of formal entry plans, explore the mechanisms and resources used by incoming superintendents as they formulate those plans, engage in content analysis of those plans, and describe the conditions under which formal entry plans provide the greatest utility to incoming

superintendents. Future studies should also investigate the specific impact of formal entry planning on organizational outcomes and superintendent efficacy.

3. This study for the first time identified and richly described the often profound personal costs incoming superintendents associate with their entry as a substantial feature of their experience. Given their breadth and depth, there exists a pressing need to better understand this particular dimension of incoming superintendents' experiences at a phenomenological level. Future studies should seek to corroborate and further explicate this important new dimension of superintendent entry. Further, additional research should seek to identify superintendents who have successfully mitigated or otherwise overcome those personal costs in order to establish a research base that might help others who, like the current participants, appear to lack mechanisms for mediating the costs to their emotional, psychological, and physical well-being as they negotiate the superintendency. Future studies should also investigate the relationship that could exist between those personal costs and turnover in the superintendency.
4. This study found noteworthy variations in the prevalence of experiential challenges among participants across several demographic variables. It did not, however, seek to evaluate the statistical significance of those variations or explain their underlying causes. Additional research is necessary to corroborate and explain those observed variations. Future studies should focus on the differential evaluation of experiential challenges within demographic categories in order to explicate the ways in which they manifest

differently for members of those subgroups. Specifically, they should further examine experiential differences within the demographic categories of gender, locale, and point of entry, where additional investigation is likely to suggest meaningful interventions.

5. Problematically, the role of context as an experiential lens is largely missing from previous studies of superintendent entry, and context is therefore largely absent from the conceptual framework that organically emerges from a comprehensive review of related literature (see Figure 1). Consequently, the larger canon of related literature insufficiently describes the experiential nature of challenges facing incoming superintendents, and future studies that rely on the emergent conceptual framework likewise stand to overlook this pivotal experiential feature. Findings from this study suggest that the conceptual framework organically emerging from the broad body of literature about leadership succession in the superintendency underestimates the powerful influence of context on the experiential nature of challenges facing incoming superintendents. Future research should explicitly seek to define a robust and comprehensive conceptual model for contemplating the various sources, intersections, and contextual underpinnings of those challenges in order to clarify and inform the long-term direction of research in this field.

Toward that end, grounded theory research is both appropriate and necessary.

## **Conclusion**

Modern superintendents engage in remarkably demanding work. Upon their entry into the position, they face an extraordinary variety of challenges, often simultaneously,

and work to advance organizational success even as they negotiate their own assimilation. Participants in this study undertook those efforts with a sense of optimism, determination, courage, and satisfaction, even when circumstances threatened not only their organizations and professional efficacy, but also their personal well-being. Their powerful individual stories reveal compelling truths about their shared, lived experiences.

This study serves several worthwhile purposes. First, it helps to fill a problematic gap in current knowledge about superintendent entry by either corroborating, extending, or refuting findings from previous research. Second, it extends the current knowledge base by contributing altogether new perspectives and findings about the nature of challenges facing incoming superintendents and about the mechanisms through which they seek to mediate them. Third, it suggests the need for a coherent conceptual framework to inform future studies and clarifies specific directions for that research. Finally, it highlights important implications for practice among multiple audiences, each of which shares a vested interest in the entry and ultimate success of incoming superintendents. Given the impending entry of many incoming superintendents over the next several years, the aggressive adoption of those recommendations and a brisk, well-guided research agenda are pressing needs as communities of scholarship and practice work together to support those individuals who hold the courage, conviction, and skill to lead our nation's public schools.

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## **LIST OF APPENDICES**

Appendix A – Initial Invitation to Participate

Appendix B – Participant Recruitment Questionnaire

Appendix C – Anticipatory Set for Study Participants

Appendix D – Informed Consent of Preliminary Interview Protocol Pilot Participants

Appendix E – Interview Protocol

Appendix F – Informed Consent of Study Participants

Appendix G – Master Code Sheet

## APPENDIX A: INITIAL INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE

Dear [participant name],

My name is David Sutton, and I am a doctoral candidate at Western Carolina University in North Carolina. My dissertation research focuses on the entry experiences of incoming superintendents in four southeastern states, and seeks to help aspiring superintendents, school districts, and state agencies plan more effectively for superintendent entry and support.

I am writing today because [referrer] of the [referring agency] recently recommended you to me as a strong candidate for inclusion in the study. Your unique experiences would very much enrich the quality of the research, its results, and their value to members of the education community, and I would like to invite you to participate in the study. As a participant, you would individually complete one primary interview lasting approximately one hour and designed to gather in-depth information about your entry experiences as a superintendent. I genuinely appreciate the multiple demands on your time, so the interview would be conducted at a time, date, and location of our choice to minimize any inconvenience you may experience. As an incentive, one participant will be randomly selected to receive a \$50 cash reward payable to a non-profit education foundation in his or her school district.

While it is not necessary that you sign and return it at this time, I have attached the study's Informed Consent statement that provides additional information. I am also happy to answer any questions you may have. Please feel free to contact me at this email address or by telephone at [phone] if I may provide any additional information you would find helpful.

Please indicate your willingness to participate, or your preference to be removed from the list of potential participants and receive no further correspondence about the study, by completing a very short questionnaire at:

<https://info.tcsnc.org/sample/respond.html>

Your unique identifier for the questionnaire is [unique id]. The online questionnaire will take no more than two minutes to complete. I respectfully request that you submit your response online by 4:30 PM on Friday, October 28, 2011 so that I may begin to finalize the study's sample.

I deeply appreciate your consideration, and I wish you all the best throughout the 2011-12 school year!

Sincerely,

David M. Sutton

## APPENDIX B: PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT QUESTIONNAIRE

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### The Entry Experiences, Challenges, and Mediating Strategies of Public School Superintendents

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Thank you for responding to your invitation to participate in this study of the entry experiences of incoming public school superintendents. While it is not necessary for you to sign and submit it at this time, I have included a copy of [link] the study's Informed Consent statement so that you may review it. Should you have any questions at all about your participation in the study, please contact me by email at [email] or by telephone at [phone]. After answering the questions below, click the <ADD> button to submit your responses. You will receive a confirmation when your responses are successfully submitted.

Thank you again, and best wishes in your work!

David M. Sutton  
[link]Western Carolina University

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#### All respondents should answer questions 1-3.

1. Please enter the unique identifier included in your invitation to participate:
    - [      ]
  2. Have you served in your current superintendent position for 18 or fewer months?
    - Yes
    - No
  3. Are you willing to participate in the study?
    - Yes, I am willing to participate.
    - No, please remove me from the list of eligible participants.
-

**If you answered "No" to question 2 or question 3, then you may skip the remaining questions.**

**If you answered "Yes" to question 2 and question 3, then please answer questions 4 - 11.**

4. Please indicate your gender:

- Female
- Male

5. Please indicate your age range:

- Age 45 or younger
- Age 46 to 60
- Age 60 or older

6. Please choose the term that best describes your racial identity:

- American Indian or Alaska Native
- Asian
- Black or African-American
- Multiracial
- Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
- White

7. Please choose the term that best describes your ethnic identity:

- Hispanic or Latino
- Not Hispanic or Latino

8. Please choose the term that best describes your school district's community setting:

- Mixed
- Rural
- Suburban
- Urban

9. Were you appointed to your current superintendency from within the same school district or from a different school district?

- From the same school district
- From a different school district

10. Please indicate the method by which you prefer that I contact you regarding your participation in the study:

- Email
- Telephone
- US Mail
- No Preference

11. Please indicate the method by which you prefer to complete your interview as a participant:

- A face-to-face meeting
- A meeting by telephone
- A meeting by video conference
- No preference

---

**After you have reviewed your responses,  
click the <ADD> button below to submit them.**

<ADD>

<CLEAR FORM>

---

**APPENDIX C: ANTICIPATORY SET FOR STUDY PARTICIPANTS**

[date]

Dear [participant name]:

Thank you again for your participation in this study of the entry experiences of incoming public school superintendents. In anticipation of our upcoming interview session at [time] on [date], I would like to share some general information about the topics we'll explore so that you have a clear sense of the nature and scope of our discussion.

I will use a standard interview guide to structure my own thinking as we complete the interview and will ask you a series of approximately eighteen questions designed to gather information about:

1. Your professional background, including professional roles you've held throughout your career;
2. Your appointment to the superintendency in your current school district;
3. Your perceptions of your current school district at the time you were appointed to the superintendency;
4. Your approach to planning for entry into the superintendency in your current school district, as well as the format and content of any entry plans you may have developed;
5. Your experiences as an incoming superintendent in your current school district, specifically including the challenges you experienced during the entry period;
6. Your approach to meeting those challenges, specifically including the strategies you used to mediate those challenges;
7. Your advice to other incoming superintendents regarding the entry period; and,
8. Any other perspectives related to your entry experience you would like to share.

Please don't hesitate to contact me by email at [email] or by telephone at [phone] if you have any questions that I can help to answer before our interview session together. I look forward to visiting with you soon.

Sincerely,

David M. Sutton

## **APPENDIX D: INFORMED CONSENT OF PRELIMINARY INTERVIEW PROTOCOL PILOT PARTICIPANTS**

This doctoral dissertation research explores the entry experiences of superintendents, the challenges they face during the entry period, and how they respond to those challenges. A better understanding of these topics will help aspiring superintendents, school districts, and state agencies plan more effectively for superintendent entry and support . It will also help to fill an important gap in current superintendent research.

I have developed a preliminary interview protocol to guide data collection. In order to improve its quality, you are invited to participate in a pilot test of that preliminary interview protocol. As a pilot participant, you will individually participate in one interview. The preliminary interview protocol will guide the interview session, and you will asked to reflect on your entry experiences as a superintendent. The interview will be conducted at a date, time, and location of your choosing in order to protect your time and minimize any inconvenience you may experience. The interview is expected to last between forty-five and ninety minutes and will be recorded. You may decline to answer any questions you wish and we may, upon your request, temporarily suspend audio recording if you wish to share information that you do not want recorded. Upon completion of the pilot interview, you will be asked to evaluate the clarity and sequence of interview questions, appraise their alignment to the study's purpose and research questions, characterize your rapport with the interviewer, and offer additional suggestions that might improve the interview protocol. I will also review the audio recording of your interview session to appraise my own interview techniques.

Your participation in the pilot test is completely voluntary, and you may choose to end it at any time. While there are no known risks to your participation, I am committed to ensuring confidentiality and protecting your privacy. Audio recordings of interviews and my written field notes will be maintained securely and destroyed five years following the dissertation's successful defense. Your answers to interview questions are intended only for use in improving the quality of the preliminary interview protocol and will not appear in the study. You will not be directly or indirectly identified in the study.

I am happy to discuss any questions you may have about the study or your role as a participant. Please contact me at [phone] or [email] should you have any questions. You may also contact my dissertation chair, Dr. Meagan Karvonen, at [phone] or [email]. You may also direct questions or concerns about your role as a participant to the Western Carolina Institutional Review Board at [phone]. To affirm your participation, complete the following section:

The researcher may \_\_\_\_\_ or may not \_\_\_\_\_ create one audio tape recording of my interview responses for use in refining the study's preliminary interview protocol.

_____	_____	_____/_____/_____
Name	Signature	Date

## APPENDIX E: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

### SESSION INFORMATION

Time of Interview: \_\_\_\_\_

Date of Interview: \_\_\_\_\_

Interview Location: \_\_\_\_\_

Interviewer: David M. Sutton

Interviewee: \_\_\_\_\_

Gender:        ☐ Male                      ☐ Female

Ethnicity:     ☐ White                      ☐ Non-White

Age Range:    ☐ ≤ 45 years        ☐ 46-60 years        ☐ ≥ 60 years

School District: \_\_\_\_\_

Community Setting: ☐ Rural                      ☐ Town

☐ Suburb                      ☐ City                      ADM: \_\_\_\_\_

Point of Entry: ☐ Internal                      ☐ External

### INTRODUCTION

Before we get started, let me take just a moment to thank you again for agreeing to visit with me and talk with me about your entry experiences as a superintendent. I very much appreciate your sharing your time and thoughts with me. My doctoral dissertation research focuses on the experiences of superintendents like yourself during their entry into the position. The purpose of the study is to describe those experiences, and I am particularly interested in learning about how you planned for entry, about the kinds of challenges you've experienced, and about how you've responded to those challenges. I'm curious if you have any questions for me about either the nature of the study or about my own background, and I'd be happy to answer those for you if you do. [*Pause for questions.*]

### INFORMED CONSENT

So, before we begin the actual interview, I also want to make sure you've had a chance to read the informed consent form that I emailed to you some time ago. It's important to me that you understand exactly what your participation in the study involves, and the steps I will take to protect your anonymity and privacy. Do you have any questions for me about the informed consent document, or about your participation? [*Pause for questions.*]

[*Collect signed informed consent form from participant.*]                      ☐ Signed & received



## GUIDING QUESTIONS

[Begin audio recording.]

1. Why don't we get started by talking a little bit about your professional background. Can you tell me about the professional roles you held leading up to your present role as superintendent in [current school district]? **[Research questions 1, 3]**
2. And, when were you appointed to the superintendency in [current school district]? **[Research questions 1, 3]**
3. How much time elapsed between your appointment to the superintendency in [current school district] and your actually starting to work in that role? **[Research questions 1, 3]**
4. What was the school district like when you were hired? **[Research questions 1, 2, 3]**
5. I'm curious to hear about how you *planned* for your entry into the superintendency in [current school district]. What kinds of things did you consider as you prepared to assume the superintendency? **[Research question 1]**
6. Can you tell me about any plans you made to facilitate your entry into the position? What sorts of goals or strategies did you include in those plans? **[Research question 1]**
7. How formal were those plans – did you detail them on paper, maintain them mentally, record them in some other way...? **[Research question 1]**
8. To what extent did you consider input from others as you developed those plans? If others provided input, whom did you include in those discussions and how did they contribute to the development of your entry plans? **[Research question 1]**
9. In retrospect, how helpful were those plans to you during your entry in the superintendency? If you had it to do over again, what, if anything, would you change about the way that you planned for your entry into the role? **[Research questions 1, 5]**
10. If you could speak directly to incoming superintendents, what advice or perspectives would you offer about *planning* for a successful entry experience? **[Research question 1]**
11. Let's switch gears for a few minutes and talk more specifically about your *experiences* during your entry in the superintendency in [current school district]. What words or phrases would you use to describe the overall nature of your

experiences during your entry into the superintendency in [current school district]? **[Research question 2, 3]**

12. I'm especially interested in learning more about the specific *challenges* you faced during your entry into the position. What sorts of challenges did you face? *[Probe here for detailed descriptions of common, contextual, and/or socialization challenges associated with entry into the position.]* **[Research question 2, 3]**
13. To what extent were you surprised by those challenges? **[Research question 2, 3]**
14. So, let's talk about how you responded to those challenges. Can you describe some of the specific strategies you used? **[Research question 4]**
15. Looking back on your entry experience and thinking about the specific challenges you faced, how effective were those strategies as you worked to overcome the challenges you've described? **[Research question 5]**
16. If you could turn back time and re-live your entry experience, in what ways, if any, would you respond differently to the challenges you experienced? **[Research question 5]**
17. Like before, if you could speak directly to incoming superintendents, what advice or perspectives would you offer about the challenges that await them? **[Research question 5]**
18. Before we conclude, take just a moment or two to reflect on our conversation and the topics we've discussed. *[Pause.]* Are there other memories or ideas from your entry experiences that you'd like to share, but that I didn't ask you about? *[Probe here for detailed descriptions.]* **[Research questions 1-5]**

*[End audio recording.]*

### NEXT STEPS

Over the next week or so, I'll use the audio recording from our interview today to create a written transcript of our conversation. As soon as it's ready, I'll email a copy to you. If you would, please take just a few minutes when you receive it to read through it and let me know if it looks accurate. You're also welcome to send me additional information you'd like to include if you think of details or information you'd like to add as you read it.

I'll also spend some time reading through the transcript and thinking about all you shared during our discussion today. As I continue to collect more data for the study, it may be the case that I contact you to see if you would be willing to answer just a few more questions. Would that be OK? *[Pause to note participant's willingness to participate in a secondary interview.]*

CLOSING

Again, thank you very much for spending time with me today and answering my questions. Your perspectives are very helpful, and I appreciate your sharing them with me. Please don't hesitate to call or email me if you have any questions about today's session or about the research itself. I'm happy to answer them for you.

## **APPENDIX F: INFORMED CONSENT OF STUDY PARTICIPANTS**

This doctoral dissertation research explores the entry experiences of superintendents, the challenges they face during the entry period, and how they respond to those challenges. A better understanding of these topics will help aspiring superintendents, school districts, and state agencies plan more effectively for superintendent entry and support . It will also help to fill an important gap in current superintendent research. Your unique experiences will enrich the quality of the research, its results, and their value to members of the education community.

Your participation in the study is completely voluntary, and you may choose to end it at any time. As a participant, you will individually complete one primary interview designed to gather in-depth information about your entry experiences as a superintendent. Some participants may be invited to participate in one secondary interview to further explore specific aspects of their entry experiences. All interviews will be conducted at a date, time, and location of your choosing in order to protect your time and minimize any inconvenience you may experience. Interviews are expected to last approximately one hour and will be recorded to ensure accurate data collection. You may decline to answer any questions you wish and we may, upon your request, temporarily suspend audio recording if you wish to share information that you do not want recorded. As an incentive to participate in the study, one participant will be randomly selected to receive a \$50 cash reward payable to a non-profit education foundation in his or her school district. I would also be pleased to share a synopsis of findings upon final approval of the dissertation.

While there are no known risks to your participation, I am committed to ensuring confidentiality and protecting your privacy. A written transcript of your recorded interview will be prepared by a professional transcription service with an established confidentiality protocol and secure mechanism for transmitting confidential information. You will be referenced by a pseudonym in the dissertation and its derivatives to protect your privacy, and I will not provide other information that might indirectly identify you. Audio recordings, transcripts, and field notes will be maintained securely and destroyed five years after the dissertation's successful defense. The dissertation will be presented to doctoral faculty at Western Carolina University. The dissertation and its derivatives may be published or presented in professional or academic settings.

I am happy to discuss any questions you have about the study or your role as a participant. Please contact me at [phone] or [email] if you have any questions. You may also contact my dissertation chair, Dr. Meagan Karvonen, at [phone] or [email], or direct questions or concerns about your role as a participant to the Western Carolina University Institutional Review Board at [phone].

To affirm your participation in the study, please complete the following section:

1. The researcher may \_\_\_\_\_ or may not \_\_\_\_\_ create an audio recording of my interview responses for use in the study.
2. I would \_\_\_\_\_ or would not \_\_\_\_\_ like to receive a synopsis of the study's findings.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

### APPENDIX G: MASTER CODE SHEET

<b>Family</b>	<b>Code</b>	<b>Definition</b>
Challenges	Board	Challenges associated with elected boards of education and their individual members, including board-superintendent relations, conflicts with and within the board, board continuity, and similar problems
	Community	Challenges associated with the broader community outside the school organization, including economic concerns, norms and traditions, and other sociocultural features
	Isolation	Challenges associated with or characterized by a sense of professional isolation associated with the role of superintendent
	Knowledge	Challenges associated with deficits in knowledge about the school organization and related topics that impede the work of participants during entry into the superintendency
	Leadership Team	Challenges associated with the leadership team within the school organization, including vacancies in leadership positions, dysfunction within the leadership team, inadequate performance among its members, and similar problems
	Media	Challenges associated with media outlets and media relations, including negative treatment of controversial issues, inter-agency and interpersonal conflicts, and similar issues
	Organizational Change	Challenges associated with institutional resistance to organizational change
	Organizational Deficits	Challenges associated with organizational deficits, including lack of internal capacity, inadequate organizational development, systemic dysfunction, and similar issues
	Personal Costs	Challenges associated with the personal costs of entry into the superintendency and the nature of the superintendent's role, including threats to family, health, personal well-being, and similar personal dimensions

<b>Family</b>	<b>Code</b>	<b>Definition</b>
	Personnel Administration	Challenges associated personnel administration, including employee misconduct, employee relations, and similar issues
	Political	Challenges associated with the political dimensions of the superintendent's work, including relationships and activities among stakeholder groups, government agencies, and other constituencies
	Predecessor	Challenges associated with or attributable to the superintendent's predecessor, including decisions previously made by the predecessor, the predecessor's legacy of influence on the school organization, and similar issues
	Role Relationships	Challenges associated with the role relationships between the superintendent and others within the school organization, including role expectations, role reconciliation, and role identity
	School Finance	Challenges associated with school finance and school budgets, including funding streams and revenue sources, budget planning, budget reductions, and similar issues
	Situational	Challenges that are uniquely tied to a particular time, setting, or superintendency as a result of special contextual factors and conditions
	Student Achievement	Challenges associated with the academic achievement of students in the school organization, including patterns of poor performance, declining performance, achievement gaps, and similar achievement deficiencies
	Time	Challenges associated with constraints on the superintendent's time, both personally and professionally, and with the tempo associated with the superintendent's work
Context	District Features/ Context	Narrative descriptions of the school organization, broader community, and operational patterns that lend perspective to the context of the superintendent's work
	Professional Background	Narrative descriptions of participants' career trajectories, professional experiences prior to their active appointments, and related background information that lend perspective to the occupational histories of individual participants

<b>Family</b>	<b>Code</b>	<b>Definition</b>
Entry	Activities	Activities undertaken by superintendents during the entry period to meet their induction goals
	Predecessor	Entry activities undertaken in collaboration with the superintendent's predecessor
	Transition Time	Descriptions of the elapsed time between the superintendent's appointment to the position by the board of education and his or her first day of work in the position
Experiential Appraisal	Mixed	Participant's mixed appraisals of their experiences as incoming superintendents throughout the duration of the entry period
	Negative	Participant's negative appraisals of their experiences as incoming superintendents throughout the duration of the entry period
	Positive	Participant's positive appraisals of their experiences as incoming superintendents throughout the duration of the entry period
Strategies	Acquiescence / Sacrifice	Acquiescence and personal sacrifice in response to challenges identified by participants
	Attitude	Leveraging, articulating, or drawing strength from personal attitudinal dispositions or deeply-held beliefs in response to challenges identified by participants
	Collaboration and Networking	Purposefully working together with others inside and outside the school organization, or cultivating professional and personal networks of support, in response to challenges identified by participants
	Communication	Engaging in deliberate discourse, both oral and written, with others inside and outside the school organization in response to challenges identified by participants
	Counsel	Seeking affirmation, clarity, support, or specific guidance from other individuals in response to challenges identified by participants
	Effectiveness	Participants' appraisals of the effectiveness of mediating strategies they applied to challenges they identified



<b>Family</b>	<b>Code</b>	<b>Definition</b>
	Entry Planning – Formal	Developing and implementing formal, written entry plans as a feature of the entry process and/or in response to challenges identified by participants
	Entry Planning – Informal	Developing and implementing informal, unwritten entry plans as a feature of the entry process and/or in response to challenges identified by participants
	Organizational Development	Working to enhance organizational capacity or effectiveness through deliberate developmental efforts in response to challenges identified by participants
	Organizational Learning / Evaluation	Formal and informal efforts to learn about key features of the school organization and/or to evaluate the effectiveness of its programs and services in response to challenges identified by participants
	Other	Unique or unusual mediating strategies not described by other codes but used by participants in response to challenges they identified
	Vision	Deliberate efforts to cultivate, refine, use, or articulate a shared vision among internal and/or external stakeholder audiences in response to challenges identified by participants